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Brazil...teenager Endrick salutes the Palmeiras fans after playing his last game for the club before moving to Real Madrid

Thailand...dejected Thailand players react after exiting 2026 World Cup qualifying *(more on page 86)*

Saudi Arabia...Cristiano Ronaldo is inconsolable after his team Al Nassr lose the Saudi Cup final on penalties *(more on page 98)*

Belgium...supporters of KV Oostende stage a funeral for their club after it was declared bankrupt *(more on page 40)*

Colombia...players of Santa Fe and Atletico Bucaramanga clash on a rain-soaked pitch during the Colombian Apertura 2024 final *(more in next month's issue)*

Turkey...Fenerbahce fans turn out in their thousands at the Sukru Saracoglu Stadium to greet incoming manager Jose Mourinho *(more on page 16)*

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FROM THE EDITOR

"Chaos reigns at Olympiacos", ran the headline of *World Soccer*'s review of the 2022-23 Greek season, as Nick Bidwell described a campaign of "wall-to-wall chaos" at the Piraeus outfit. Compare and contrast that verdict with the scenes in Athens at the end of May, as Ayoub El Kaabi's goal helped them become the first Greek team to win a European trophy – a victory made all the sweeter by doing so at the home of their arch-rivals, AEK.

They say a week is a long time in politics; a year in football must be an absolute eternity.

The last 12 months have certainly delivered on the pitch and, in this issue, we've attempted to tell the full story of the 2023-24 European season; from Bayer Leverkusen's shock Bundesliga triumph to the more predictable dominance of Manchester City, Real Madrid, Internazionale and Paris Saint-Germain. We've also dived into the continent's smaller leagues and the major UEFA club competitions, while also looking further afield to title races in Tanzania, Australia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In this issue, we've attempted to tell the full story of the 2023-24 European season

Alongside all that, this issue is also a celebration of strikers – fittingly so, as Harry Kane is officially confirmed as the 2023-24 ESM Golden Shoe winner – as we applaud the goalscoring exploits of Serhou Guirassy, Ademola Lookman, Viktor Gyokeres, Francesco Camarda and Kevin Phillips.

As you read this, the European Championship and Copa America will be in full swing. We will, of course, tell the full stories from both Germany and the United States in next month's issue.

In the meantime, please enjoy this comprehensive review of the 2023-24 season. And remember, if it hasn't been a particularly good one for you and your team, don't despair; things could feel very different this time next year – just look at Olympiacos.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

Done deal...Spanish newspapers announce Mbappe's arrival

SPAIN

Mbappe completes 'dream' move to Real Madrid

France captain Kylian Mbappe described his long-awaited move to Real Madrid as a "dream come true" after the transfer was confirmed in June.

The deal, worth a reported €15 million a season in salary plus a €150m signing-on bonus to be paid over five years, brings to an end one of the longest-running transfer sagas in recent football history; Mbappe had been linked with a move to the Spanish capital ever since bursting onto the scene with Monaco in 2015-16.

"Nobody can understand how excited I am right now!" Mbappe declared via Instagram. "So happy and proud to join the club of my dreams."

Confirmation of the move did, however, bring to an end another of Mbappe's dreams: that of competing in his home city at the Paris Olympics (more on page 78) later this summer.

"My club's position was very clear, so from that moment on, I think I [knew] I won't be taking part in the Games," Mbappe told reporters at Euro 2024. "I'm joining a new team in September, so it's not the best way to start an adventure."

Instead, Mbappe will head to America for *Los Blancos'* pre-season tour, taking in friendlies against Milan, Barcelona and Chelsea.

"We have reached a point where we cannot discount any action. We will always try to exhaust all diplomatic avenues…but unfortunately time is against us"

PFA chief executive Maheta Molango warns players may be forced to strike over the congested football calendar

WALES

Wales and Page part ways

Wales have sacked manager Rob Page after three and a half years in charge.

The 49-year-old had worked with the Football Association of Wales (FAW) for seven years, initially as manager of the U21s and then as assistant to the senior side, before eventually replacing Ryan Giggs in the top job.

Under his guidance, Wales reached the last 16 at Euro 2020 and qualified for Qatar 2022, their first World Cup appearance since 1958. But the former defender, who won 41 Welsh caps, ultimately paid the price for failing to reach Euro 2024, as the Dragons were eliminated by Poland in the play-offs.

"On behalf of myself and the entire FAW, I extend our heartfelt gratitude to Rob for his commitment and dedication to his roles for the national teams," said FAW chief executive Noel Mooney. "Under Rob Page's leadership, our Cymru men's team has achieved significant milestones and victories which have created many incredible memories for our nation."

Among the early favourites to replace Page is Osian Roberts, another former Wales assistant coach, who recently led Italian side Como to promotion from Serie B (more on page 45).

Turn to page 16 for more Ins & Outs

OBITUARIES

Fans' favourite ...Kevin Campbell

Kevin CAMPBELL
(1970-2024)

"The coldest of finishers, but the warmest of men," began the BBC's video obituary to Kevin Campbell. As a mountain of tributes poured in after his death was announced in June following a short illness, it is difficult to think of a better choice of words for the player and the man.

At almost every club he played for, Campbell was celebrated for his goals on the pitch and adored for his personality off it: as a homegrown hero at Arsenal, where he won four trophies including the league title in 1991, as a ruthless finisher at Nottingham Forest, whom he fired to Premier League promotion, and as a saviour of Everton and West Bromwich Albion, both of whom he helped achieve unlikely survivals.

It is perhaps at Goodison Park where Campbell is most adored. The striker arrived on Merseyside in March 1999 on loan from Turkish side Trabzonspor.

At Everton, he rediscovered his form and love of football – and the fans loved him back. Quickly dubbed "Super Kev", he scored nine goals in eight games to steer the Toffees to safety, earning a permanent contract and going on to become the club's captain.

In January 2005, he joined West Brom with the club rooted to the bottom of the table, where they remained as late as March. Yet with key goals against Manchester City, Birmingham City and, especially, relegation rivals Crystal Palace, he helped them complete a dramatic "Great Escape", as the first-ever club to survive Premier League relegation after lying bottom on Christmas Day.

Campbell ended his career at Cardiff City, before entering the media.

His son Tyrese, who plays in the Championship for Stoke City, led the tributes: "He is my idol, the one who I wanted to be when I grew up," said the 24-year-old. "He was the life and soul of every party and room he blessed, a one-in-a-million person that was loved by everyone."

In a club statement, Arsenal said: "We are devastated to learn that our former striker Kevin Campbell has died after a short illness. Kevin was adored by everyone at the club."

Everton said: "Everyone at Everton is deeply saddened by the death of our former striker Kevin Campbell at the age of just 54. Not just a true Goodison Park hero and icon of the English game, but an incredible person as well – as anyone who ever met him will know. RIP, Super Kev."

Tommy BANKS
(1929-2024)

Believed to be England's oldest living international before his death in June, Banks won six Three Lions caps in 1958, including four at that year's World Cup. The left-back spent the bulk of his career at Bolton, winning the 1958 FA Cup.

Gerhard AIGNER
(1943-2024)

A former referee, Aigner served as UEFA's general secretary from 1989 until 2003, playing a key role in the creation of the Champions League.

Matija SARKIC
(1997-2024)

Born in Grimsby, Sarkic came through the youth ranks at Anderlecht and Aston Villa, going on to play for a host of English clubs before joining Millwall last summer. A Montenegro international, the goalkeeper was named man of the match in June's friendly with Belgium, his last game.

Untimely ...Matija Sarkic

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Football fought the law – and nobody won

From FIFPro v FIFA to Manchester City v the Premier League, legal disputes threaten to overshadow football for years to come

Taking on the Premier League... Manchester City are ready for legal battles

The words were specific from a man who not only knew his football but could boast a place in its history: "I fear intensely for our game of football. Only money matters today and the game will eventually end up being suffocated to death by its own golden collar."

Not at all. The man so depressed by his gaze into the future was Vittorio Pozzo, the only manager to win two successive World Cups (with Italy in 1934 and 1938). He was talking not through a mystic medium but back in 1948, some 76 years ago.

Pozzo died in 1968. He had seen football evolve from amateurism into professionalism, from weekend pastime to mass entertainment, from local rivalry to statement of international supremacy. When Pozzo died, winning the World Cup was the ultimate achievement in the days when national team football set the golden standard. Had Pozzo lived two years more, he would have seen his belief apparently be vindicated by Pele's Brazil.

As the first World Cup televised worldwide in colour, the 1970 finals have often been held up as a watershed; football's *Wizard of Oz* moment, when it stepped out of a front door in sepia Mexico into a brave new world of Technicolor.

Television money and its associated advertising and sponsorship soon followed, providing riches that turned the old structure on its head. Very soon, the club game surpassed the value of national team football. Club football is a weekly televisual vehicle. National team football cuts in only occasionally. Hence FIFA's desperate pursuit of club gold.

> Maybe soon the top sports lawyers will enjoy a high-profile popular status to match the footballers

Was this one of these doom and gloom merchants prophesising a collapse into chaos after the Bosman ruling? Or fear of the influence of television riches, the explosion in number and size of international competitions, or Manchester City's challenge to the Premier League?

Here is a major flaw in the expanded FIFA Club World Cup, which kicks off next year in the United States. Club football is week-by-week, month-by-month, season-by-season, year-by-year – so what intrinsic value is offered by a club joust staged once every four years? One reason the Latin Club Cup of the immediate post-war years was rendered redundant by the European Cup was that the overall winning nation was computed only once every four years.

Reports from Spain suggesting that Real Madrid had no interest in the new Club World Cup due to concern about the wear and tear on their players were soon quashed; club president Florentino Perez would never pass up between €50 million and €150m for four summer weeks' action.

Meanwhile in June, FIFPro submitted a legal claim against FIFA to the Brussels Court of Commerce regarding the International Match Calendar, claiming that the current schedule is "overloaded" and "unworkable". Everyone else is going to court, so why not the players' association?

Maybe soon the top sports lawyers will enjoy a high-profile popular status to match the footballers. The club world is heading, at increasing pace, beyond even Pozzo's feared endgame with winners and losers decided not out on the football pitch and not even in the committee rooms, but in the courtroom.

Too late for common sense to prevail. This is a quality notably lacking in football governance ever since the game's popularity exploded out of its own control and into the financial stratosphere. Perez and FIFA supremo Gianni Infantino believe they can ride the tiger, but tradition tells us there are no guarantees.

Tradition was usurped when amateurism was overthrown by professionalism; when club football grew more important than the national team game; when the Football League was abandoned by the Premier League; when technology intruded onto the pitch. Similarly, no law says that the Premier League must survive forever. One day we may reflect that Manchester City's four-in-a-row title sequence was the beginning of the end for what the esteemed Brian Glanville dubbed the "Greed Is Good League".

Football's statutes used to insist that associations, leagues, clubs and players should not use the courts of the land on pain of expulsion, hence the relief on the creation of the Court of Arbitration for Sport in 1984. Every sporting entity was supposed to accept CAS as the ultimate dispute adjudicator; that naive hope was blown out of the water by Jean-Marc Bosman's lawyers in securing their revolutionary freedom-of-tenure judgment from the European Court in 1995.

Simultaneously, UEFA with its financial fairplay regulations and the Premier League with its profit and sustainability rules have sought to impose their own subjective controls on clubs' freedom of operation – and yes, that freedom does include the right to go bankrupt.

Now the game has just seen Manchester City challenge the Premier League not only over its Associated Party Transaction rules but its very decision-making process, the so-called "tyranny of the majority." In the background runs the insoluble concern over football as a vehicle for sportswashing.

City's overriding focus off the pitch later this year will be the Premier League's 115 financial fairplay charges – charges they strongly deny. Of course, the City Football Group, if its owners are not comfortable with Premier League membership, could always sell up and divert their petrodollar zillions in any one of their other 12 clubs around the world.

The end of the road for an imploding Premier League as we know it? Why not? Nothing lasts forever.

It may come as a surprise to some, but football existed happily and successfully at all levels of society for more than 100 years before the phenomenon of the Premier League; it will continue to exist after the Premier League has self-destructed and the money-grabbers and sportswashers have moved on.

The doom and gloom merchants can go with them. They will not be missed. Association football will survive. In Ponderano, northeast of Turin, Pozzo may rest easy in his grave.

Prophetic...Vittorio Pozzo, Italy's World Cup-winning manager of the 1930s, poses with his team

BOOKS THIS MONTH

BRING ME THAT HORIZON
By Miguel Lourenco Pereira (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Bring Me That Horizon is a fascinating quest into the heart and soul of Portuguese football, tracing a route north to south, island to island, without forgetting the profound connection with Africa and Brazil. From Eusebio's glorious career to Candido de Oliveira's adventures as a British intelligence agent, it reveals there's much more to Portugal's football heritage than Ronaldo and Mourinho.

TOO GOOD TO BE FORGOTTEN
By Ben Dobson (Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

This book revisits the ten-year golden era from 1975 to 1985 when the hegemony of the major big-city clubs in England was challenged and, at times, usurped. Three wise men of the North East – Brian Clough, Bobby Robson and Lawrie McMenemy – delivered success on the pitch for Nottingham Forest, Ipswich Town and Southampton, as well as a sense of pride in the communities of the towns and cities they put on the map.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Uncomplicated, unruffled, unbeatable

Carlo Ancelotti is the personification of Real Madrid's relentless pursuit of Champions League crowns

Six times in the past 11 years, Real Madrid have won the Champions League. With most serial winners or multiple champions, there is a sense that they have moved the game on tactically in some way. The Italian winners of the 1960s gave us *catenaccio*. Ajax gave us Total Football. The English champions of the late '70s and early '80s a robust pressing game. More recently, Arrigo Sacchi's Milan and Pep Guardiola's Barcelona took football in a new direction. What have this Real Madrid done? They've won football matches, often by producing a moment of individual magic just when it was needed.

This season's campaign was not quite like that of two years ago, when in every round they looked out only to somehow turn the tie around: three goals in the final half hour against Paris Saint-Germain, an 80th-minute equaliser and extra-time winner against Chelsea, then two astonishing stoppage-time goals and an extra-time winner against Manchester City. But still, RB Leipzig, Manchester City, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund will probably all feel they had the chances to come through. It became a cliché: Real Madrid find a way. Somehow, opponents miss opportunities against them, opposing goalkeepers and defenders make mistakes; their own players produce moments of extraordinary genius.

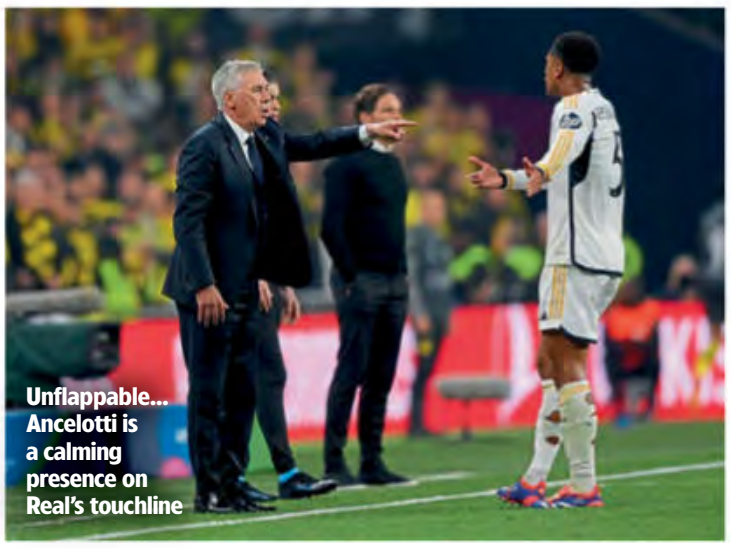
Is it enough to say that they simply have better players? Probably not, but clearly that is part of it – or it certainly was in Carlo Ancelotti's first spell in charge of Madrid, or under Zinedine Zidane. More recently, though, post-COVID, Madrid have been more restrained in their spending. Kylian Mbappe is their first Galactico signing since Eden Hazard in 2019. Jude Bellingham may have cost €103 million and Aurelien Tchouameni €80m, but both were young players on the way up, not pre-existing stars.

Champions League No.5...Ancelotti lifts the trophy for a fifth time

> Ancelotti is so unruffled on the touchline. He never seems to be in a flap, never appears to panic. He exudes belief and the players pick up on that

Yet somehow that old ability has remained. They still cling on, they still get away with things, and they still score just when they need to. Belief is a huge part of it. They are still Real Madrid. The more they pull games out of the fire, the less it concerns them that the game is in the fire and the more confident they are that they can withdraw it the next time. It helps that Ancelotti, like Zidane before him, is so unruffled on the touchline. He never seems to be in a flap, never appears to panic. He exudes belief and the players pick up on that.

Ancelotti, like Zidane, is not an ideological coach. The two biggest influences over Zidane's tactical thinking appear to have been Marcello Lippi and Aime Jacquet, but he is essentially a player-whisperer, somebody who can coax great performances from the great, largely it always seemed, by trusting them. Ancelotti is perhaps a little more interventionist, his education remarkably varied as he played



Unflappable... Ancelotti is a calming presence on Real's touchline

under Nils Liedholm, Arrigo Sacchi and Fabio Capello; given that background, little wonder that he is essentially a pragmatist.

In the modern world, in which it has become so familiar to speak of coaching philosophies, it can be easy to underestimate Ancelotti. There was nothing complicated about the 4-3-1-2 he favoured in the Champions League final, with Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo as a pair of mobile roving forwards, Jude Bellingham behind them although at times as a false nine, operating on the platform of a midfield three in which Toni Kroos was metronomic, supported by the energy and elegance of Federico Valverde and Eduardo Camavinga. In the first half they were too open, Vinicius and Bellingham perhaps playing too high. A quick tweak at half-time and, from the hour on, Madrid were in control. Ancelotti's in-game changes, his substitutions and subtle tinkerings, almost invariably have a positive impact.

And yet there is an oddity about Ancelotti. He has won five Champions Leagues, two more than any other manager in history, and yet he has only won six league titles across a 30-year managerial career, 25 years of which have been spent at the very highest level. He is the only manager to win a league title in each of Europe's five major leagues, and yet he has only won it twice in Spain. It's not a bad record as such, and it's likely to get better in the coming seasons as Barcelona face financial and political meltdown, but it's not great.

It may be that the very calmness, the sense of perspective, that makes him so effective in knockout ties, means that Ancelotti lacks the almost sociopathic drive that carries the most successful managers through a whole season at maximum level. But in the Champions League he is supreme, and offers a welcome reminder that, while tactical philosophies are indisputably important, man-management and creating the right environment still matters. Players are not robots yet.

Francesco CAMARDA

(Milan & Italy)

Wayne Rooney, Cesc Fabregas, Toni Kroos, Mario Gotze: four of the players to have been named the European Under-17 Championship Player of the Tournament. Now, Camarda has added his name to that illustrious list.

The 16-year-old had already generated plenty of excitement after making his debut for Milan at the age of 15 last November, becoming the youngest player in Serie A history in the process.

A marauding centre-forward, Camarda was particularly effective in the final, running the Portugal defence ragged with a display packed with powerful dribbling, clever movement and devastating finishing, scoring twice in a 3-1 win.

Having recently signed his first professional contract, the forward is expected to blossom under Milan's new head coach Paulo Fonseca.

Rodrigo MORA
(Porto & Portugal)
The finals' Golden Boot winner with five goals, following on from jointly-topping the scoring charts for his club in the UEFA Youth League.

Mihajlo CVETKOVIC
(Cukaricki & Serbia)
Already a first-team regular in the Serbian top flight, the 17-year-old striker struck four goals during Serbia's run to the semi-finals.

Chido OBI
(Arsenal & Denmark)
Also eligible for England and Nigeria, the lanky front man helped fire Denmark to the last four, where they bowed out to eventual winners Italy. Currently attracting interest from Bayern Munich.

Mikey MOORE
(Tottenham Hotspur & England)
England's top scorer at the finals with four goals, Moore made his Spurs debut in May, becoming the club's youngest-ever Premier League player aged just 16 years and 277 days.

"Normally a coach is loved after victories. In this case I feel that I am loved before the victories...I promise you from this moment, I belong to your family. This shirt is my skin"

Jose Mourinho announces his arrival as manager of Istanbul giants Fenerbahce

IN

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

45 Moves That Caught Our Eye This Month

OUT

EUROPE

ENZO MARESCA
A former assistant to Pep Guardiola, the Italian left Leicester City to take charge at **Chelsea**.

FABIAN HURZELER
After steering St Pauli to the 2.Bundesliga title, the 31-year-old left Germany for **Brighton**.

WAYNE ROONEY
After an unsuccessful spell at Birmingham City, Rooney returned to the EFL with **Plymouth**.

VINCENT KOMPANY
The Belgian manager left relegated Burnley to take charge of German giants **Bayern Munich**.

Surprise appointment ...Vincent Kompany

ANTONIO CONTE
The former Italy, Juventus, Chelsea, Inter and Tottenham manager was hired by **Napoli**.

MARCO BARONI
The coach left Verona for **Lazio**, replacing Igor Tudor who exited after less than three months.

VINCENZO ITALIANO, THIAGO MOTTA, RAFFAELE PALLADINO, ALESSANDRO NESTA
After leaving Fiorentina, Italiano took charge of **Bologna** to replace new **Juventus** boss Motta. Palladino replaced Italiano at **Fiorentina**, with Nesta then taking his place at **Monza**.

PAULO FONSECA & BRUNO GENESIO
Ex-Roma and Lille boss Fonseca was appointed by **Milan** after Stefano Pioli stepped down. **Lille** replaced him with former Rennes coach Genesio.

FRANCK HAISE & WILL STILL
After Francesco Farioli exited to join Ajax, **Nice** appointed Haise from **Lens**, who then hired ex-Reims coach Will Still to replace him.

GARCIA PIMIENTA
Sevilla hired the Las Palmas and ex-Barca B coach to replace Quique Sanchez Flores.

SERGIO RAMOS
The Spanish defender ended his second spell at **Sevilla**, with a move to MLS rumoured.

JAGOBA ARRASATE & VICENTE MORENO
After the departure of Javier Aguirre, **Mallorca** poached Arrasate from **Osasuna**, who then hired ex-Almeria boss Moreno to replace him.

PACO LOPEZ
After their relegation from La Liga, **Cadiz** hired Lopez to replace Mauricio Pellegrino.

FERNANDO TORRES
Atletico Madrid named their former Spain striker to manage their B Team.

NURI SAHIN
Borussia Dortmund appointed their former midfielder as head coach to replace Edin Terzic.

MATS HUMMELS
Dortmund also said goodbye to 35-year-old centre-back Hummels, whose contract expired.

MIROSLAV KLOSE
Germany's all-time record scorer took charge of second-tier side **Nuremberg**.

JOSE MOURINHO
After narrowly missing out on the Turkish title, **Fenerbahce** hired Mourinho as their manager.

GIOVANNI VAN BRONCKHORST
The ex-Rangers coach also moved to Istanbul, taking charge of 2021 champions **Besiktas**.

VITOR BRUNO
Porto promoted Bruno from assistant manager after the departure of Sergio Conceicao.

BRIAN PRISKE
The ex-Denmark defender left Sparta Prague to replace Arne Slot as **Feyenoord** head coach.

GENNARO GATTUSO
Hajduk Split hired the Italian as head coach.

ROBBIE KEANE
The Irishman left his job as **Maccabi Tel Aviv** manager after just one year in charge.

TOSIN ADARABIOYO
Chelsea snapped up the 26-year-old centre-back from Fulham on a free transfer.

PEDRO LIMA & LUIS GUILHERME
Wolverhampton Wanderers and **West Ham United** both signed 18-year-old Brazilians. Wolves paid £8.5m for right-back Lima from Sport Recife, while Palmeiras winger Guilherme joined the Hammers for £25.5m.

LLOYD KELLY
Newcastle United signed the left-sided defender from Bournemouth on a free transfer.

TANGUY NDOMBELE
Tottenham released the French midfielder.

HIROKI ITO
Bayern Munich paid Stuttgart €30m for the 25-year-old Japanese defender.

ALEIX GARCIA
The Girona midfielder joined German champions **Bayer Leverkusen** for €18m.

FERNANDO SANTOS
The former Portugal and Poland boss took charge of the **Azerbaijan** national team.

STANISLAV CHERCHESOV
Russia's coach at the 2018 World Cup took charge of **Kazakhstan**'s national team.

SOUTH AMERICA

DAVID OSPINA
The Colombia goalkeeper returned to first club **Atletico Nacional** after two years with Al Nassr.

ASIA

LUIS ALBERTO
The midfielder left Lazio for **Al Duhail** in Qatar.

IGOR STIMAC & SUNIL CHHETRI
India sacked coach Stimac after their 2026 World Cup hopes ended, while record goalscorer Chhetri retired from international football.

CONCACAF

HIRVING LOZANO
The Mexico and Napoli winger announced he will join MLS side **San Diego** in January 2025.

GONZALO PINEDA & NICO ESTEVEZ
Both **Atlanta United** and **FC Dallas** fired their coaches after poor MLS seasons.

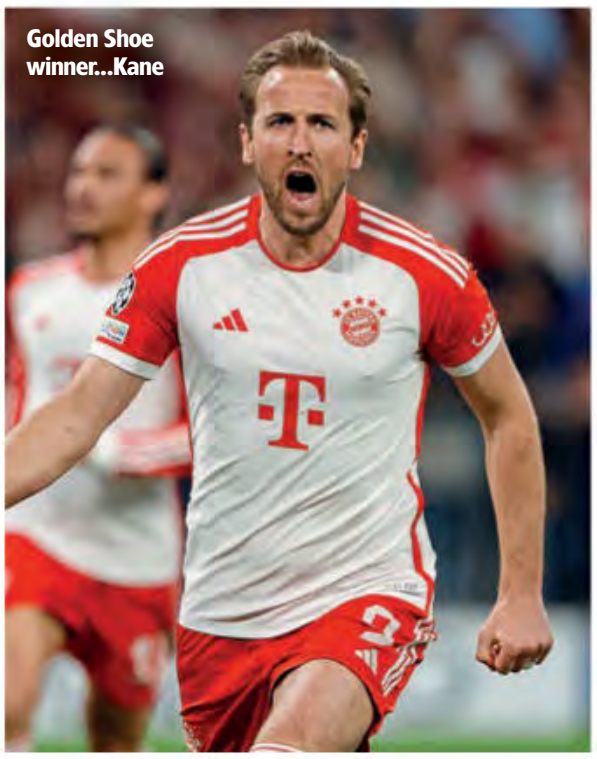
ESM
EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

King Kane

Bayern Munich frontman Harry Kane has clinched the European Golden Shoe after scoring 36 league goals in the 2023-24 campaign. In doing so, he becomes only the second English winner of the coveted prize after Sunderland striker Kevin Phillips in 1999-2000 (more on page 70).

Kane's tally equals that of last year's winner Erling Haaland, and it means the Bundesliga has now provided the ESM Golden Shoe winner in three of the past four seasons (Robert Lewandowski won it in 2020-21 and 2021-22 also with Bayern).

As in former years, the award winner is decided on points using the UEFA coefficient ranking system, which rewards players in the most competitive leagues. Hence marksmen from England, France, Germany, Spain and Italy benefit from a points multiplier of two. The ranking includes regular domestic league games only and not play-offs or cup matches.


Golden Shoe winner...Kane

Surprise package... runner-up Guirassy

ESM GOLDEN SHOE 2023-24: FINAL RANKINGS

Pos	Name	Goals	Factor	Pts
1	**Harry Kane** *(Bayern Munich)*	36	2	72
2	**Serhou Guirassy** *(Stuttgart)*	28	2	56
3=	**Erling Haaland** *(Manchester City)*	27	2	54
3=	**Kylian Mbappe** *(Paris Saint-Germain)*	27	2	54
5=	**Artem Dovbyk** *(Girona)*	24	2	48
5=	**Lautaro Martinez** *(Internazionale)*	24	2	48
5=	**Lois Openda** *(RB Leipzig)*	24	2	48
8	**Alexander Sorloth** *(Villarreal)*	23	2	46
9	**Cole Palmer** *(Chelsea)*	22	2	44
10=	**Viktor Gyokeres** *(Sporting)*	29	1.5	43.5
10=	**Luuk de Jong** *(PSV)*	29	1.5	43.5
10=	**Vangelis Pavlidis** *(AEK Athens)*	29	1.5	43.5
13	**Alexander Isak** *(Newcastle United)*	21	2	42
14=	**Jude Bellingham** *(Real Madrid)*	19	2	38
14=	**Jonathan David** *(Lille)*	19	2	38
14=	**Phil Foden** *(Manchester City)*	19	2	38
14=	**Alexandre Lacazette** *(Lyon)*	19	2	38
14=	**Robert Lewandowski** *(Barcelona)*	19	2	38
14=	**Dominic Solanke** *(Bournemouth)*	19	2	38
14=	**Ollie Watkins** *(Aston Villa)*	19	2	38
21	**Mauro Icardi** *(Galatasaray)*	25	1.5	37.5
22=	**Amahl Pellegrino** *(Bodo/Glimt)*	24	1.5	36
22=	**Mohamed Salah** *(Liverpool)*	18	2	36
22=	**Deniz Undav** *(Stuttgart)*	18	2	36
25=	**Kevin Denkey** *(Cercle Brugge)*	23	1.5	34.5
25=	**Santiago Gimenez** *(Feyenoord)*	23	1.5	34.5
27=	**Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang** *(Marseille)*	17	2	34
27=	**Ante Budimir** *(Osasuna)*	17	2	34
27=	**Heung-min Son** *(Tottenham Hotspur)*	17	2	34
30=	**Maximilian Beier** *(Hoffenheim)*	16	2	32
30=	**Jarrod Bowen** *(West Ham United)*	16	2	32
30=	**Antoine Griezmann** *(Atletico Madrid)*	16	2	32
30=	**Jean-Philippe Mateta** *(Crystal Palace)*	16	2	32
30=	**Youssef En-Nesyri** *(Sevilla)*	16	2	32
30=	**Bukayo Saka** *(Arsenal)*	16	2	32
30=	**Dusan Vlahovic** *(Juventus)*	16	2	32
30=	**Wissam Ben Yedder** *(Monaco)*	16	2	32
38=	**Simon Banza** *(Braga)*	21	1.5	31.5
38=	**Mateo Cassierra** *(Zenit)*	21	1.5	31.5
38=	**Edin Dzeko** *(Fenerbahce)*	21	1.5	31.5
38=	**Lawrence Shankland** *(Hearts)*	21	1.5	31.5
42=	**Ermedin Demirovic** *(Augsburg)*	15	2	30
42=	**Olivier Giroud** *(Milan)*	15	2	30
42=	**Andrej Kramaric** *(Hoffenheim)*	15	2	30
42=	**Borja Mayoral** *(Getafe)*	15	2	30
42=	**Alvaro Morata** *(Atletico Madrid)*	15	2	30
42=	**Rafa Mujica** *(Arouca)*	20	1.5	30
42=	**Victor Osimhen** *(Napoli)*	15	2	30
42=	**Vinicius Junior** *(Real Madrid)*	15	2	30
50	**Ramon Mierez** *(Osijek)*	19	1.5	28.5

La Liga's top scorer...Girona striker Dovbyk

Gyokeres... the joint-highest finisher outside the "big five"

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ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	24
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	9
Lukas Hradecky (Bayer Leverkusen)	8
Andriy Lunin (Real Madrid)	8
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	7
Marcin Bulka (Nice)	6
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	5
Alisson (Liverpool)	4
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	4
Ederson (Manchester City)	2
David Raya (Arsenal)	2
Mile Svilar (Roma)	2
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Real Madrid)	1
Lucas Chevalier (Lille)	1
Paulo Gazzaniga (Girona)	1
Kamil Grabara (Copenhagen)	1
Nordin Jackers (Club Brugge)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Giorgi Mamardashvili (Valencia)	1
Christos Mandas (Lazio)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Alexander Meyer (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	1
Andre Onana (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Provedel (Lazio)	1
Bart Verbruggen (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1

DEFENDERS

Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	40
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	28
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	27
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	23
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	19
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	15
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	13
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	12
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	11
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	11
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	11
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	11
Ben White (Arsenal)	10
Bremer (Juventus)	8
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	6
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	5
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	5
Piero Hincapie (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Benjamin Pavard (Internazionale)	5
William Saliba (Arsenal)	5
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	4
Gabriel (Arsenal)	4
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	4
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	3
Riccardo Calafiori (Bologna)	3
Dante (Nice)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	3
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	3
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	3
Odilon Kossounou (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Waldemar Anton (Stuttgart)	2
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Yan Couto (Girona)	2
Matteo Darmian (Internazionale)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	2
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	2
Arthur Masuaku (Besiktas)	2
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	2
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	2
Jordan Teze (PSV)	2
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Axel Witsel (Atletico Madrid)	2
Nathan Ake (Manchester City)	1
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	1
Sam Beukema (Bologna)	1
Daley Blind (Girona)	1
Olivier Boscagli (PSV)	1
Jarrad Branthwaite (Everton)	1
Lilian Brassier (Brest)	1

Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	1
Sebastian Coates (Sporting)	1
Danilo (Juventus)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Club)	1
Zeno Debast (Anderlecht)	1
Eric Garcia (Girona)	1
Miguel Gutierrez (Girona)	1
David Hancko (Feyenoord)	1
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	1
Isak Hien (Atalanta)	1
Goncalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Florian Lejeune (Rayo Vallecano)	1
Tino Livramento (Newcastle United)	1
Jhon Lucumi (Bologna)	1
Castello Lukeba (RB Leipzig)	1
Ian Maatsen (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Koki Machida (Union Saint-Gilloise)	1
Lisandro Martinez (Manchester United)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Maximilian Mittelstadt (Stuttgart)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Stefan Posch (Bologna)	1
Luca Ranieri (Fiorentina)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Julian Ryerson (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Fabian Schar (Newcastle United)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Niklas Sule (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Filippo Terracciano (Milan)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Fikayo Tomori (Milan)	1
William Troost-Ekong (PAOK)	1
Destiny Udogie (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Lucas Vazquez (Real Madrid)	1
Leny Yoro (Lille)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	44
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	25
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	23
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	21
Rodri (Manchester City)	17
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	13
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	13
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	12
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	11
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	9
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	9
Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	6
Vitinha (Paris Saint-Germain)	6
Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool)	5
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	4
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	4
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	3
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	3
Joey Veerman (PSV)	3
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	2
Aleix Garcia (Girona)	2
Yangel Herrera (Girona)	2
Curtis Jones (Liverpool)	2
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	2
Mohammed Kudus (West Ham United)	2
Douglas Luiz (Aston Villa)	2
John McGinn (Aston Villa)	2
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	2
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	2
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	2
Robert Andrich (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	1
Julian Brandt (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Giacomo Bonaventura (Fiorentina)	1
Emre Can (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Maxence Caqueret (Lyon)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	1

TEAM OF THE SEASON
(Based on cumulative votes through the season)

Thomas Delaney (Anderlecht)	1
Ederson (Atalanta)	1
Wataru Endo (Liverpool)	1
Rasmus Falk (Copenhagen)	1
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	1
Chris Fuhrich (Stuttgart)	1
Gavi (Barcelona)	1
Pedro Goncalves (Sporting)	1
Pascal Gross (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Isco (Real Betis)	1
Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad)	1
Enzo Le Fee (Rennes)	1
Pierre Lees-Melou (Brest)	1
Ruben Loftus-Cheek (Milan)	1
Kobbie Mainoo (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Martin (Girona)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Scott McTominay (Manchester United)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Hidemasa Morita (Sporting)	1
Exequiel Palacios (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Lucas Paqueta (West Ham United)	1
Mario Pasalic (Atalanta)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	1
Rodrigo Riquelme (Atletico Madrid)	1
Marcel Sabitzer (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Xavi Simons (RB Leipzig)	1
Aurelien Tchouameni (Real Madrid)	1
Warren Zaire-Emery (Paris Saint-Germain)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	42
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	26
Kylian Mbappe (Paris Saint-Germain)	26
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	26
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	19
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	12
Artem Dovbyk (Girona)	9
Serhou Guirassy (Stuttgart)	9
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	9
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	9
Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	9
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	7
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	7
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	6
Victor Boniface (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Ayoub El Kaabi (Olympiacos)	4
Kai Havertz (Arsenal)	4
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	4
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	4
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	3
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Alexander Sorloth (Villarreal)	3
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	3
Julian Alvarez (Manchester City)	2
Jeremy Doku (Manchester City)	2
Evanilson (Porto)	2
Santiago Gimenez (Feyenoord)	2
Sebastien Haller (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	2
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	2
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	2
Savio (Girona)	2
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	2
Wissam Ben Yedder (Monaco)	1
Jarrod Bowen (West Ham United)	1
Jonathan David (Lille)	1
Memphis Depay (Atletico Madrid)	1
Luis Diaz (Liverpool)	1
Paulo Dybala (Roma)	1
Edin Dzeko (Fenerbahce)	1
Niclas Fullkrug (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Alejandro Garnacho (Manchester United)	1
Rasmus Hojlund (Manchester United)	1
Mauro Icardi (Galatasaray)	1
Alexander Isak (Newcastle United)	1
Rafael Leao (Milan)	1
Romelu Lukaku (Roma)	1
Jean-Philippe Mateta (Crystal Palace)	1
Darwin Nunez (Liverpool)	1
Lois Openda (RB Leipzig)	1
Riccardo Orsolini (Bologna)	1
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	1
Goncalo Ramos (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Jadon Sancho (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Gianluca Scamacca (Atalanta)	1
Dominic Solanke (Bournemouth)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1
Leandro Trossard (Arsenal)	1
Ayase Ueda (Feyenoord)	1
Deniz Undav (Stuttgart)	1
Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa)	1

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Serhou Guirassy

Stuttgart's prolific and in-demand Guinean centre-forward led the charge as his club claimed a shock Champions League berth

All across Europe, the 2023-24 campaign has been defined by the rise of the underdog, yet few sides boast a story as remarkable as Bundesliga outfit Stuttgart and their star striker Serhou Guirassy. Bayer Leverkusen have rightly received plenty of credit for their unbeaten domestic season and run to the final of the Europa League, but it is the Swabians who had to work from a lower base.

Last season, Stuttgart battled relegation, escaping by the very skin of their teeth via the promotion-relegation play-off. A year on, they have not only qualified for football's premier club competition, but did so by finishing ahead of Bayern Munich in the Bundesliga.

Since winning their third Bundesliga crown in 2006-07, it has been a tale of woe and underachievement for the Reds. Much of the intervening period has been spent barely keeping their heads above water under various experienced managers, from Christian Gross to Huub Stevens to Bruno Labbadia.

Instead, they turned to a 42-year-old novice - a decision that proved a masterstroke. Former Bayern Munich youth coach Sebastian Hoeness had little to recommend him at senior level beyond a two-year stint in charge of Hoffenheim and, upon his appointment in April 2023, he inherited a team anchored to the foot of the table.

Polished diamonds... Guirassy celebrates with Deniz Undav and Enzo Millot

For a self-professed fan of the club where he spent his formative years, saving Stuttgart from the drop would have been satisfying by itself. But Hoeness went far beyond that, taking the club to new heights through a mix of positive football, aggression and player development.

> Stuttgart's squad is littered with testaments to Sebastian Hoeness' management, but the biggest success story is star striker Serhou Guirassy

Stuttgart's squad is littered with testaments to Hoeness' management – Maximilian Mittelstadt, Chris Fuhrich and Waldemar Anton earned call-ups to Germany's Euro 2024 squad, French youngster Enzo Millot, signed for €1.5 million in 2021, has flourished, as has Brighton loanee Deniz Undav who finished with 18 Bundesliga goals and also earned a Germany call-up for the Euros – but the biggest success story is Guirassy.

Recognised as a prodigy in his younger days, the Guinea international striker has enjoyed the best season of his career at the age of 28. His 28 league goals – 35 per cent of the club's Bundesliga total – may have fallen eight short of Harry Kane's Golden Boot-winning tally, but adjusted for

Key influence ...Guirassy with Stuttgart coach Sebastian Hoeness

minutes-per-goal and Guirassy's mid-season injury, he was firmly the equal of the England international.

The key to his sudden explosion? Self-belief and trust, both factors Hoeness has sought to foster within the squad. "There is no secret, really," he told German publication *DW*. "I haven't changed much. We have a good coach, a good team, we have everyone's trust and that's important. Trust really matters in football."

Born in Arles, France, Guirassy took up football "for fun" and stood out for his physicality and skill at a young age. His talent saw him snapped up by Lille from Laval at the age of 19, but he struggled to live up to the expectation and was often beset by injuries. This prompted something of a nomadic career, with the player never putting down roots anywhere.

A 2016 move to Cologne, in search of a change of scenery, exposed him to German football for the first time, but his playing time was modest. "I was young, I don't remember what age I was, but I was injured a lot," Guirassy said. "I played a few games and scored some goals, even in the Europa League. But that's football. It's difficult sometimes. You need to overcome those hard times and never give up."

While it remains to be seen whether his injury worries are well and truly a thing of the past, Guirassy is very much seizing the present. He opened the campaign with 14 goals in eight matches, scoring with every one of his first eight shots on target, and has allied that efficiency with all-round centre-forward play that his role models would be proud of.

"I like to identify myself with the style of [Karim] Benzema, [Robert] Lewandowski," he said. "I like Kane's style of play. He's good at everything. He helps his team-mates and he scores goals."

The Guirassy market is set to be a bullish one this summer, with links from all over Europe materialising by the minute. What happens next is anybody's guess, but the 28-year-old knows he has a good thing and is in no hurry to uproot himself again. "I don't want to leave for the sake of leaving," he said. "I feel good here in Stuttgart."

Oluwashina Okeleji

Greenland

Danish territory launches bid to join CONCACAF – but FIFA membership remains a long shot

It was May 13, when a courier delivered an application from the Greenland Football Association (KAK) to the Miami headquarters of CONCACAF directly addressed to general secretary, Philippe Moggio, formerly requesting membership of the North, Central American and Caribbean federation.

The move came after years of prevarication on behalf of KAK, which inevitably came to the conclusion that despite cultural and political links with Europe – Greenland is an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark – UEFA membership would never happen.

Greenland's national team head coach Morten Rutkjaer said: "We are convinced that membership in CONCACAF is the right opportunity and development for Greenlandic football. It will provide an attractive platform where clubs and national teams will play more international matches and tournaments.

"This is an incredibly exciting time for Greenlandic football. Our application for CONCACAF membership marks a significant step forward in our ambitions to compete at a higher level. We have worked hard to get here, and I am convinced that this will inspire our players and develop our football culture."

KAK's membership of UEFA has been blocked since the European body decided to make membership of the United Nations a key criterion – a belated decision to keep out Gibraltar and pacify politicians in Spain, which lays claim to the British overseas territory.

After appealing to the Court of Arbitration for Sport on the basis that this change was made after their application, Gibraltar were admitted in 2013 and joined FIFA three years later along with Kosovo, whose application had faced opposition from Serbia.

Greenland coach... Morten Rutkjaer

FIFA has admitted no new members since then and, despite support from the Danish Football Association (DBU), Greenland are highly unlikely to be the next new member of the world body. At its recent congress in May 2024, FIFA quietly changed its own entry criteria to mirror that of UEFA, prompting KAK to race to get its CONCACAF bid lodged in case any changes made in Bangkok affected their application.

Even if Greenland are accepted into CONCACAF as its 42nd member, they will join six other associations in the region – the Dutch islands of Bonaire and Sint Maarten, and the French territories of French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Saint Martin – in now being stuck at this level.

KAK president Kenneth Kleist said: "The partnerships with DBU and KSI [the Iceland Football Association] mean that we are organisationally strong as we start the dialogue with CONCACAF."

The Greenlanders will be happy with a chance to provide greater opportunities for its footballers, whose only current senior competitive outlet is the football tournament at the biennual Island Games.

Rutkjaer adds: "Through our connections among the existing member countries in CONCACAF, we will expand our knowledge and network, so we know what to prepare for with all national and club teams...I am sure that these matches will be a huge motivation for all young players in Greenland."

CONCACAF membership would provide the opportunity to play in the Nations League and Gold Cup qualifiers, along with club and futsal tournaments.

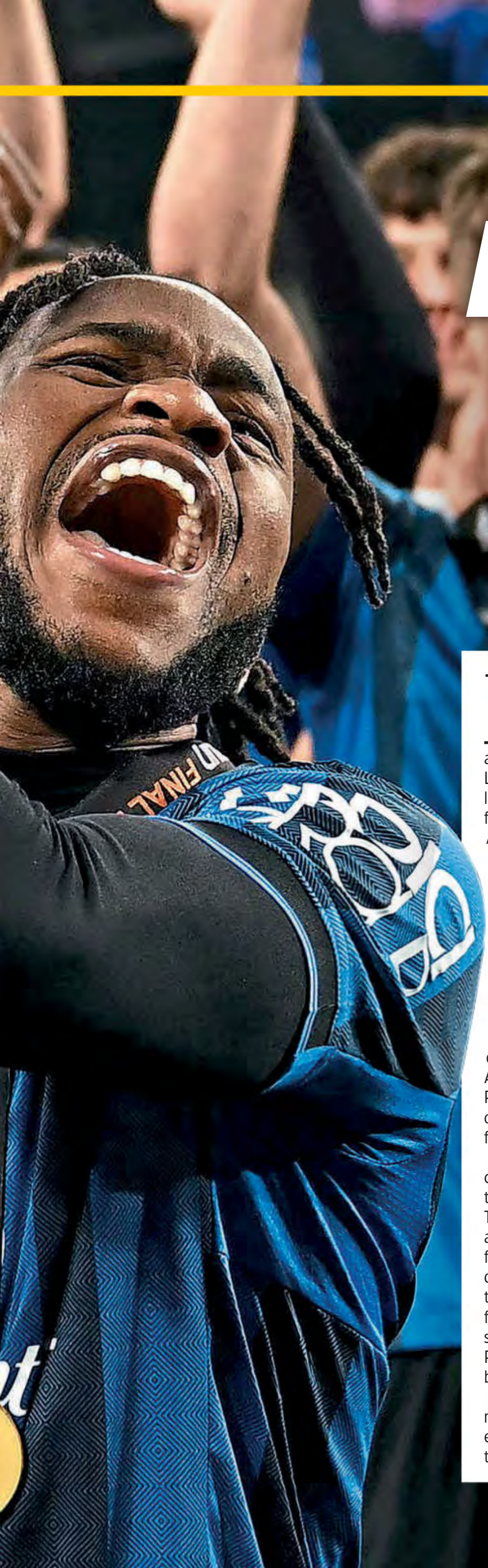
For CONCACAF's existing members, the prospect of a trip to the Greenlandic capital of Nuuk would be daunting given the distances involved. From Suriname on the northern tip of South America, for example, to Greenland is 6,700km direct – but in reality even longer given the lengthy travel connections.

Lack of a suitable ground would make playing in Nuuk difficult in the short-term, but KAK has initiated a strategic partnership with KSI, which will include hosting Greenland's home matches.

Greenland v Bonaire in Reykjavik in CONCACAF Nations League Group C is an unlikely international fixture, but one that could be coming some time soon.

Steve Menary

DUBLIN FINAL 2024
UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE



HAT-TRICK HERO

Ademola Lookman wrote his name into European football's history books with a hat-trick in the Europa League final

Words: Oluwashina Okeleji

For one night only, Ademola Lookman was the best footballer in the world.

The setting was Dublin, and the occasion was the Europa League final. While all of the talk leading into it was Bayer Leverkusen's fairy-tale unbeaten run, their opponents, Atalanta – who had already dispatched both Liverpool and Marseille – were determined to write their own story.

Lookman, who most Italian publications had as starting on the bench on the morning of the final, was cast in the lead role. The 26-year-old was immense, thrice striking at the heart of the Germans, each goal better than the last, and in doing so entering the exalted company of some of the sport's greatest players: Alfredo Di Stefano, Pierino Prati, Ferenc Puskas and Jupp Heynckes – the only other men to score a hat-trick in the final of a UEFA club competition.

It was a redemptive end to a challenging second season in Italy for the Charlton Athletic youth product. The 2022-23 campaign, his first after arriving from Bundesliga side RB Leipzig for a fee of €9m rising to €15m, was defined by instant impact; although truncated by injury in the run-in, he finished the season as Atalanta's top scorer in Serie A and was named their Player of the Season, signposting better things to come.

That promise did not quite materialise. Or perhaps in light of events in Dublin, it is more appropriate to say it only did so belatedly, albeit on the biggest stage and with the highest of stakes. In the intervening period, Lookman underwent something of a refining under the fiery gaze of Gian Piero Gasperini, a coach famed not only for punching well above the weight of his teams, but for empowering strikers like few others can.

With hindsight, it was never going to be that simple. Watching the Nigeria international put Bayer Leverkusen to the sword, it was hard to reconcile his conviction and menace on the night with Gasperini's comments following March's 1-1 draw against Sporting in the round of 16: "Sometimes he hides from the game," the Atalanta manager said, before offering clarification and context to his assessment. "We all see the potential and speed of Lookman, but it must be admitted that he didn't used to play so offensively. He used to score six or seven goals a year, whereas now he is quick, skilled in dribbling, and even strong in heading.

"I believe that when he approaches the penalty area, he can become a key player for our team."

The player himself admitted as much in an interview with *The Athletic*, detailing the work that had gone into making him a more efficient attacking machine: "[Gasperini] is very big on playing forward and creating many opportunities to score goals," Lookman said. "For me, he has made my football much simpler in how I think about it.

"I feel like I understand football a lot more now. Previously, I never used to view football the way I view it now.

From boy to man... Lookman during his first season at Charlton Athletic

When I watch games, I look for certain things in terms of movements and spaces – those little details that I never really used to look for before."

It has been a study in gradual progress, timed for detonation at just the right moment. His brace – and overall performance – against Milan in early December was, looking back, probably the first indication of something brewing underneath the surface, as he posted a Man-of-the-Match display in a famous 3-2 victory. There was also a match-winning turn later that month against Lecce, a 1-0 win decided by the sort of lethal shooting that Alonso's Leverkusen would have no answer for five months on.

While Lookman finished two goals shy of his league total from 2022-23, he scored five goals in European competition this term – all in the knockout stages, and all altering the game states of the respective ties: one against Sporting, which drew *La Dea* level on aggregate, one against Marseille in the semi-finals to give his side the lead on aggregate, and that treble in the final to bring glory back to Bergamo.

It was a closing act that marked a transition from boy to man for the shy and unassuming player, who also finished as Nigeria's top goalscorer at the Africa Cup of Nations in January. All three of his strikes in the Ivory Coast came in the knockouts as well, two of them against arch-rivals Cameroon.

The Super Eagles would ultimately fall short, edged out by the host nation in the final, an outcome that represented a huge missed opportunity. It no doubt fuelled Lookman's resolve to seize the moment when another chance at immortality presented itself.

His goals – arriving late on the defender's blindside to convert a cut-back, skipping past a challenge to curl into the bottom corner from the edge of the box, and crashing a shot into the roof of the net having created some space with a stepover – were all, in obvious ways, a fulfilment of Gasperini's assessment, with a header the only thing missing.

Once described as having "stunk in training" by former RB Leipzig head coach Jesse Marsch, it was not always a given that Lookman would fulfil his sizeable potential.

Hat-trick hero... Lookman stands with the match ball and his medal after the Europa League final

This is a player who was promoted to the Charlton senior set-up at the age of 17, and who scored on his debut both for RB Leipzig and for Everton, the latter an impudent dink as a substitute in a famous 4-0 drubbing of Pep Guardiola's Manchester City. Yet, at the age of 24, Lookman had already turned out for five different clubs, and was in danger of being written off as a journeyman.

Despite that eye-catching introduction on Merseyside, the young forward struggled for playing time and impact as Everton cycled through managers.

In January 2018, it was decided that he should go out on loan and, defying the preference of Goodison dugout incumbent Sam Allardyce, Lookman opted against a move to Derby County in favour of going abroad. Destination: RB Leipzig. With five goals in 11 mostly substitute appearances, Lookman hit the ground running in Germany, sowing the seed for a return down the line.

In the meantime, he returned to Everton to find yet another manager, this time Marco Silva, in office. Yet again, minutes were difficult to come by, and while Silva labelled him a "fantastic player", insisting it was "really important to keep him", Lookman never found continuity under the Portuguese manager, and was all too grateful when RB Leipzig came back for him, this time on a permanent basis. "I didn't have to think too long about returning," he said.

The second spell was nowhere near as smooth, however. Under another new manager in Julian Nagelsmann, Lookman played the equivalent of four matches in minutes across the whole season. While he was clearly valued within the hierarchy, the coaching staff had little use for him. And so began a spate of loans.

> "I feel like I understand football a lot more now"
>
> **Ademola Lookman on working with Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini**

With Fulham in 2020-21, he scored four and assisted another four, but suffered relegation and came to be remembered for his failed stoppage-time Panenka attempt at the London Stadium against West Ham United, a game the Cottagers lost 1-0. His work ethic shone through, however, in what was a bleak campaign played out to empty stadiums during COVID. "He would stay back for hours working on technical work, taking free-kicks, crossing or shooting," assistant coach Stuart Gray recalled. "It was a case of [us] restricting the time he wanted out on the training pitch, the amount of shots he would take, to make sure he had enough energy for us at the weekend."

At Leicester City the following season he scored eight and assisted five as the Foxes reached the Europa Conference League semi-finals but, while the attraction was mutual, the club could not justify the outlay to make his loan deal permanent, and were on the cusp of a negative spiral anyway. "His professionalism was unbelievable and the only sad part for us was at the end of that season, we had a clause where we could have bought him for £14 million," Brendan Rodgers, who was Leicester boss at the time, told *TalkSport*.

So strong was the impression he made that Lee Congerton, who left Leicester to take up a role as Atalanta's head of recruitment, took Lookman to Serie A. In Gasperini, he found a manager who has made an art form out of polishing undesirables into gleaming gems.

And, in doing so, Lookman has found himself. Where once there seemed a debate over his best position, now the player is unequivocal: the "inside wide left area" is where he does his best work.

Where once his reserved persona made him a difficult read for coaches, now he is a leader of men, even if not entirely by design.

"I don't like talking because I am more of a listener. If you listen more, you learn more," he tells *World Soccer*. "Some people enjoy talking and that's fine. I only do my talking whenever it is necessary."

Turn to page 50 for a review of the Europa League final

Key influence... Lookman with Gian Piero Gasperini

GOING UP

The story of Sweden striker Viktor Gyokeres' career has been one of upward trajectory – and there's plenty more to come from the Sporting superstar

Words: Bence Bocsak

It's becoming a craze in Portugal: Sporting supporters walking around the Estadio Jose Alvalade before matchdays with their hands placed over their mouths and their fingers intertwined. They do it in homage to the club's new icon, Viktor Gyokeres, who does the same gesture every time he scores. Something he's been doing at an unprecedented frequency since he arrived at the club last summer.

The Sweden international scored 43 goals in his debut season and led the club to its second league title under Ruben Amorim. In the process, he has established himself as one of the most coveted strikers in world football. But his rise to the top has been far from straightforward. There was a point in his career when his coaches doubted whether he would even make it to the very top of the game.

Spotted by IF Brommapojkarna scouts as a 12-year-old playing for his local club IFK Aspudden-Tellus, Gyokeres was not initially open to a move.

"He was not ready to move at the time," Dalibor Savic, who coached Gyokeres for Brommapojkarna's Under-19 team, recalls.

Other teams tried to poach Gyokeres from Aspudden-Tellus, but as a teenager he wanted to stay close to his roots. It was only when he finished high school at 16 that he felt ready to uproot his life and join Brommapojkarna.

Yet, despite being so sought after, he didn't initially stand out at his new club.

"When I became the head coach, he was not one of the best players there [in the Under-19 team]," Savic says. "He was a good player, but we had much better players who we also sold before we sold him. I had Joseph Colley, who was the outstanding player in my team, and we sold him to Chelsea. There were also others who were in front of him."

What stood out about Gyokeres was not his quality but his desire to improve. He may not have been the best player in the team, but he had the best work ethic.

"He had the mentality to train hard," Savic says. "He was a really hard-working player. His preparation for training was really professional even at a young age. He worked really hard in the training sessions."

That work ethic was instilled by his father, Stefan, who had played football himself for Stugun and IFK Ostersund in Sweden before becoming an assistant coach at Gyokeres' first club, Aspudden-Tellus. Stefan helped his son understand the importance of a professional mindset from a young age. He also took care of his development outside of Brommapojkarna, employing individual coaches to work on improving his son's game.

Portuguese league champion...Gyokeres lifts the 2023-24 Primeira Liga trophy

"Viktor did a lot of extra training by himself, paying an extra individual coach to work on his technique," Savic says. "I know that he also paid an individual coach to work on his strength and his physical ability."

At Brommapojkarna, Gyokeres gradually adjusted to his new environment. Coming from a semi-professional background to one of the best academies in Sweden, it took him a while to slot into the team, but when he did he showed the kind of form that Sporting supporters have witnessed in his debut season. In total, Gyokeres played two seasons under Savic and scored 28 goals in 27 appearances.

"He was a goalscorer from a young age. You can see that he was always in the right position to tap it in or to shoot from long distance because he has a really strong shot from distance.

"But he also had the quality and the nose to see where the situation was going to go and come to where the ball was going to appear to score goals inside the box."

That combination made him a frightening prospect for young defenders in Sweden, and it was why he was flagged as a player with the potential to be promoted to Brommapojkarna's first team when the club was relegated to Sweden's third tier.

After relegation, Brommapojkarna underwent major changes at first-team level. A new coach arrived in former Sweden international, Olof Mellberg, and a lot of the club's first-team players moved onto pastures new. Instead, they hedged their bets on youth to solve the squad overhaul and, as a result, Gyokeres was promoted to the first team alongside several of his team-mates from Savic's Under-19 team.

"Being relegated absolutely helped him get more first-team opportunities," Savic says. "It was crucial for him. The gap between Under-19 football and the third tier is not huge, so it was easy for him. That year he scored a lot of goals, and he was a key player for Brommapojkarna."

In his debut season, Gyokeres scored seven goals in 19 league games and helped Brommapojkarna earn promotion back to Sweden's second tier, where the young forward really exploded onto the scene. With 13 goals and eight assists in 29 appearances, he helped his team earn back-to-back promotions.

"He got a fast development playing

First loan spell... Gyokeres in action at St Pauli in 2020

in the third and second tier," Savic says. "There was a bit of doubt [before relegation to the third tier]. If Brommapojkarna had played in the first division, I don't think he would have played as a starter. In the second division, it would have been 50-50 because the technical part of his game was not at the level Olof [Mellberg] wanted it to be. It helped him that they were in the third tier, and they had to play him. He got to develop a lot quicker and show them that he can score a lot of goals and that he had selling potential."

It also helped that after his debut season in the first team, Gyokeres went to represent Sweden at the Under-19 European Championship in Georgia, where he was named in the Team of the Tournament after finishing joint-top of the scoring charts with three goals.

It was those performances that attracted the attention of Brighton, who brought him to the club at the beginning of the 2018 January window.

At Brighton, Gyokeres went into the club's academy set-up. He had brief moments in the first team, but struggled to make an impact under manager Chris Hughton. Despite continuing his excellent goalscoring form for the club's Under-21s, the young forward was sent out on several loans, with his most successful spell at St Pauli. Gyokeres spent a season with the German side and played a key role in helping the club avoid relegation from the second tier.

"He was very important for us during the season," the club's assistant coach at the time, Andre Trulsen, recalls. "Viktor was a very motivated footballer who always worked hard on himself and often grabbed a few balls after training to take shots. He was an honest, reliable and strong-willed character. He was very focused on taking his next step in professional football."

> "Now, it's no question that he is a top footballer. As soon as he made the move to Portugal...it was clear he was going to score a lot of goals...now he's on top of the world and can choose to stay or leave"
>
> **Gyokeres' former coach, Dalibor Savic**

At St Pauli, instead of playing his preferred number nine role, Gyokeres was often used on the wing due to competition in the forward line, which, according to Trulsen, helped to hone his craft: "He was often used as a winger, which didn't hurt him."

Many may classify Gyokeres as a typical goal-poaching number nine. But to the men who worked with him, he is much more than just an old-fashioned centre-forward.

"When he decided to go deep and take the ball with him, he was unstoppable," Savic remembers. "You can see it even now when he goes on a run from the halfway line, nobody can stop him. He's so strong at carrying the ball."

"Viktor is two-footed and difficult to defend. He is also fast and good in one-v-one situations," Trulsen adds.

In the end, Gyokeres was never able to express his talent at Brighton, but he moved on to Coventry City where, under Mark Robins, he gradually established himself as one of the best forwards in the EFL Championship.

"We always knew he could play that style of football in England. You could see his progress at Coventry, he was playing really good football," Savic says.

Entering the prime of his career at Sporting, the sky is the limit for what's next – even according to Savic, who never would have envisaged the career his protégé would go on to have.

"Now, it's no question that he is a top footballer. As soon as he made the move to Portugal with his physique, fitness level and determination, it was clear he was going to score a lot of goals. It was a smart career move. Now he's on top of the world and can choose to stay or leave."

Wherever that choice might take him, Gyokeres will undoubtedly continue to succeed. He's proven time and time again that he cannot be written off. To many, becoming an icon at Sporting may be the pinnacle of their career, but for Gyokeres there are many more steps to go.

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Sky Blues star... Gyokeres scored 43 goals for Coventry City

eyewitness

Alec McQuarrie reports

GREECE

The light and shade of Greek football

The 2023-24 season was a crash, bang, wallop of a rollercoaster ride in Greek football. On the pitch, four teams were locked in an oscillating title race until the last, while a Greek club won a senior men's UEFA competition for the first time ever. Off the pitch, however, it was the same old sad story, with fan violence continuing to steal the headlines and even leading to the death of a Greek police officer. At the centre of all the madness were Olympiacos.

Despite finishing third in the league for the second year in a row – missing out on a top-two spot in consecutive seasons for the first time in 30 years to end a period of unparalleled domestic dominance stretching all the way back to 1997 – the team from Piraeus suffered from a severe case of main character syndrome, obstinately refusing to exit the spotlight.

But in early December, their campaign was one misstep away from falling into a second season mired in mediocrity. A controversially disallowed winner in Volos eventually forced the government to introduce measures painfully reminiscent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Olympiacos fans rioted when the 88th-minute decision didn't go their way and tear gas from police only succeeded in dispersing both sets of players who got caught in the crossfire.

The match was suspended, as were the next weekend's fixtures at the request of Greek referees. Two days after the 2-2 draw, which was eventually finished over an hour later, a result that left Olympiacos languishing in fourth in the Greek Super League – and already out of the Europa League – their coach Diego Martinez was given his marching orders.

With no football on, fans turned to the midweek volleyball derby against arch-rivals Panathinaikos. Hooligans clashed outside the arena and a 31-year-old riot policeman was shot in the leg with a flare. The officer tragically died in hospital within a month.

Since records began in 1983, at least 13 people have died in Greece as a result of football hooligan violence. That includes 29-year-old AEK Athens fan Michalis Katsouris who was stabbed to death in ▸

History makers... Olympiacos players celebrate with their fans after reaching the Europa Conference League final

Shootout hero...Tzolakis in the quarter-final penalty-shootout victory over Fenerbahce

clashes with Dinamo Zagreb ultras back in August 2023.

The phrase "*ποτέ ξανά*" ("never again") has long been used in Greece in relation to football-related deaths. But fatalities were getting more frequent, not less. The government had had enough. Two months, they figured, was sufficient for everyone to learn their lesson. Behind-closed-doors football was back, long after it fell out of fashion. And by everyone, they meant football fans from every club in the top flight.

This was not received well by the public, and especially at clubs like Kifisia, a north Athens club embarking on their maiden Super League season. Ted Philipakos, president and creative director at soon-to-be promoted Athens Kallithea, could understand the frustrations of the blameless clubs and fans.

"The punishment was an overreaction," said Philipakos. "And I want to be extremely careful saying that because a person died due to unconscionable behaviour at a sporting event that isn't an outlier. It's the way things have been for too long. The government and the public at large are rightfully disgusted and fed up, and something does need to change.

"But at the same time, it's something that happened at a volleyball match, and you punished the entire football environment. For the smallest clubs, who are just trying to survive, both in the league and financially, to close their stadiums was heavy handed."

Two months is a long time in football, and even longer at Olympiacos. Martinez's successor, Carlos Carvalhal, was sacked even before the return of fans in February. The Portuguese boss, though, did manage one crucial result: his first game in charge, a 5-2 win over Serbian outfit TSC Backa Topola, to ensure a Europa Conference League play-off berth.

Carvalhal's replacement, Jose Luis Mendilibar, arrived in February with the memory of last season's Europa League success at Sevilla still fresh in his mind. However, fans doubted how the former Eibar boss would settle in Piraeus, having only ever played and managed in his native Spain. Concerns were aggravated when Olympiacos suffered a catastrophic 4-1 home defeat to Maccabi Tel Aviv, then managed by Robbie Keane, in the Europa Conference League round of 16.

Then, a damaging 3-1 home loss to Panathinaikos dropped them to fourth in the table, 15 points off the top.

Europa Conference League winners... Olympiacos players celebrate after beating Fiorentina

Ahead of the second leg against Maccabi, Mendilibar's charges were given a 2.5 per cent chance of qualification by OptaAnalyst.

But by half-time, they were astonishingly 3-0 up and the tie was level at 4-4. Eran Zahavi's penalty put the Israelis back ahead on the hour, but Olympiacos were not discouraged. Ayoub El Kaabi produced a ludicrous rocket of an overhead kick five minutes later. And in extra-time, Stevan Jovetic and Youssef El-Arabi put the tie to bed. The miraculous 6-1 win was the club's biggest-ever victory in Europe.

> Every fairy-tale needs a hero, and who better to score the dramatic winner in the 116th minute than Ayoub El Kaabi?

Turkish giants Fenerbahce were up next. They hadn't lost a league game away from home all season and had won 3-0 at Belgian league leaders Union Saint-Gilloise in the previous round. But by the 57th minute in Piraeus, they were 3-0 down.

Fener kicked into gear and reduced the deficit to 3-2, setting up a tense second leg in which they scored after 11 minutes. Two hours passed and the teams were still locked at 3-3 on aggregate. At this point, 21-year-old academy keeper Konstantinos Tzolakis was handed a Herculean task. The

The dark side of Greek football...AEK fans stand in front of a makeshift memorial to Michalis Katsouris

young Greek was made first-choice just one month before and had only saved one out of eight penalties in his fledgling senior career. Three astounding saves followed, and Tzolakis' name was etched into the annals of myth and legend.

The good news continued less than a week later, as Olympiacos' Under-19s became the first Greek team to win a UEFA competition in any age group, romping to a 3-0 final win against Milan.

The seniors also found themselves in unchartered waters. Aston Villa, European Cup winners in 1982 and challenging for a Champions League place in the Premier League, were heavy favourites to brush aside the first-time semi-finalists.

But once again, Mendilibar's men made a mockery of expectations and produced a tactical masterclass at Villa Park. El Kaabi netted a clinical hat-trick in the 4-2 thriller and the Karaiskakis prepared itself to burst the eardrums of everyone within a five-kilometre radius in the return tie.

The bars around Piraeus were packed hours before the second leg. Supporters chanted, whistled and cheered like the players could hear them; you wouldn't be surprised if they could. But the decibel level was nothing compared to the cacophony of car and motorbike horns that greeted the conclusion of the 2-0 triumph. The train platform north to Athens was deserted at midnight. Instead, fans packed into the carriages to head one stop south and no one in Piraeus slept, even if they tried.

They had more than enough reason to celebrate. Their first-ever European final, and Greece's first since 1971, was being held at their bitter rivals AEK Athens' brand new OPAP Arena.

Meanwhile in the league, each of the "Big Four" had a mathematical chance of taking the title. AEK were favourites, having led the standings since late April. Although Olympiacos' race ended with defeat to PAOK, they could still deny AEK when they faced them in the penultimate league game of the season. Once again, the main characters refused to move out of the spotlight and a 2-0 win at a delirious Karaiskakis handed the crown to PAOK.

"I was devastated," lamented lifelong AEK fan Vaggelis. "I was ready to go to the Agia Sophia and celebrate. But despite that, this has been the most exciting season in the history of Greek football."

Dimitris Vergos, AEK Athens' reporter for *Gazzetta.gr*, agreed: "I can't ever remember a season with four teams still in the race so late on. Maybe in the mid-2000s there were three teams going for the league. This season and the previous season have been the most impressive for sure. I think the fact that the Greek league has become more competitive has helped all the big four clubs of Greece."

And even though they finished third, Olympiacos supporters wouldn't dispute it either. Their fairy-tale season got the triumphant ending it deserved – an extra-time 1-0 victory over Fiorentina to seal the Conference League crown. AEK fans will rightly criticise the inexcusable – yet highly predictable – damage to their stadium. Unfortunately, there will always be villains in Greek football.

But every fairy-tale needs a hero, and who better to score the dramatic winner in the 116th minute than Ayoub El Kaabi? A late bloomer, the 31-year-old was still playing in the Moroccan top flight in 2021. His debut season in a UEFA competition saw him steal Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Radamel Falcao's joint-record for most goals in the knockout rounds.

He and the rest of the squad, along with Mendilibar, will forever be remembered as legends in the cafes and bars scattered around the docks of the Greek capital. On balance, Olympiacos were not the best team in Greece in 2023-24, but their season will never be forgotten.

Turn to page 52 for a review of the Europa Conference League final

Ayoub El Kaabi

From star of CHAN to King of Greece

It has been a long time coming but, at the age of 31, Ayoub El Kaabi is finally fulfilling the potential he first demonstrated as a 24-year-old at the 2018 Africa Nations Championship (CHAN).

That it took the Morocco international striker that long to gain everyone's attention owes to a humble upbringing that forced him to park not only his education, but his interest in football. Until the age of 21, El Kaabi earned a living for himself and his family as a carpenter on the streets of Mediouna, near Casablanca.

Thankfully, the cream of his talent rose to the top: at the urging of friends, he took up playing for local club ES Lalla Mariam, before catching the eye of Casablancan side RAC in the second division.

His star turn at the CHAN, however, cast him in the brightest of lights. As Morocco hosted and won the 2018 edition of CAF's competition for players based in their domestic leagues, El Kaabi – who by now was starring at RS Berkane – scored nine goals in five starts and was named the tournament's best player.

His exploits sparked a scramble of interest, and while he has since gone on to play for five more clubs – and represent the main Morocco national side at the World Cup – El Kaabi's movement, aerial prowess and composure have made him a reliable source of goals throughout his career.

Even so, Olympiacos could not possibly have expected this level of return when they signed him from Qatari club Al Sadd last summer.

On the way to the Greek club's first-ever European trophy, El Kaabi's goals – including a UEFA record 11 in the knockout stages, five of which came in two legs against tournament favourites Aston Villa in the semi-finals – have led the way to success in the Europa Conference League. Capping off a stellar campaign with the extra-time winner in a nail-biter of a final against Fiorentina was all too fitting.

Oluwashina Okeleji

Champion... El Kaabi kisses the ECL trophy

eyewitness

Alasdair Howorth reports

TANZANIA

The biggest derby you've never heard of

"Today, dust and sweat!"

The chant rings out across the stadium with flares lighting up the night sky as thousands of fans taunt their city rivals.

These scenes would be expected in huge footballing cities like Glasgow, Madrid, Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro. Instead, it is the humid equatorial air of Dar es Salaam that is lit up by the supporters of Young Africans SC as they celebrate a title-winning victory over their fierce rivals Simba SC in the Kariakoo Derby.

It's not just the 40,000-plus Yanga fans that celebrate as they leave the Benjamin Mkapa National Stadium; half of Tanzania will have been erupting in celebration, from the tightly packed streets of Dar es Salaam to the sleepy villages on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. That is how deeply the rivalry between East Africa's biggest clubs go. As one fan puts it: "If you're Tanzanian, you're either Simba or Yanga – there is no neutral."

Between them, the two clubs have won the Tanzanian league 52 times in 65 years, including every title over the past decade. Two neighbouring teams dominating a particular division is not unheard of, but what sets the Kariakoo Derby apart from other local rivalries around the globe is how intertwined the clubs are. In fact, they were once the same team.

In the 1920s, Dar es Salaam was a relatively young city, founded as the colonial administrative centre of then German East Africa. While the Europeans lived in beautiful colonial districts near picturesque beaches, African labourers and porters who were brought to the city for work were forced to live in a settlement known as Kariakoo (the word literally is the Swahili-ized version of "carrier corps"). In their time off, labourers would play football on the nearby Jangwani grounds, eventually leading to the formation of Jangwani Sports Club in the 1920s.

The British colonial government, fearful of young African men organising and potentially overthrowing their rule, banned African football clubs until 1934, when the rules were relaxed, allowing the New Young club to form and join the local league.

Yet the club's early years were defined by in-infighting. By 1936, one group of fans had broken away to form their own club, Stanley FC, which would eventually be renamed Simba Sports Club, while the original team went on to become Young Africans Sports Club – AKA Yanga.

While Simba incorporated local Arabs and were seen as relatively indifferent to colonial rule, Yanga retained their anti-colonial identity and played a key role in bringing about an independent Tanzania. Like many other major clubs in Africa – Al Ahly in Egypt, Wydad Casablanca in Morocco and USM Alger in Algeria – Yanga served as a place for disgruntled Africans to meet and organise. Such was the importance of Yanga fans to the independence movement, that the Tanganyika African National Union – the political party ▸

Kariakoo Derby
...Yanga v Simba

Crunching challenge ...two players vie for the ball in the Kariakoo Derby

Credit for all images: Loveness Bernard

that ended colonisation and was led by Julius Nyerere, the father of Tanzania – actually adopted Yanga's green kit as the party's colour.

It's this proximity that has created such a heated rivalry between the two clubs. They don't simply share a city; they don't even just share a neighbourhood; they share a past as one club.

Both sides still have their headquarters on different sides of Kariakoo, which is no longer a small settlement but East Africa's largest market. And both clubs have been able to retain a deep intimacy with their fanbases in large part thanks to their ownership models. For Yanga's entire history, the club has been completely fan-owned and controlled by members. Simba followed a similar model until 2016 when they opted to move to the 50+1 model where fans still retain a majority of shares but also have external investment.

That shared ownership has gone beyond Dar es Salaam and allowed the clubs to reach every corner of the country where they both have official fan groups in every large town. From Mbeya on the southern border with Zambia, to Kagera on the banks of Lake Victoria, travelling fans from Simba and Yanga often outnumber the home support.

But despite the clubs being arguably the most fervently supported south of the Sahara, it is not one that is divided along community or sectarian lines. Despite the passion, there is remarkably little aggression between fans. Most fierce rivalries in the world feature lots of policing, plenty of violence and often a heavy-handed separating of supporters pre-match. But in Dar es Salaam, the pre-match is more festival than battleground.

All along Taifa Road next to the National Stadium, there are stages blaring Afrobeats and Amapiano, beer tents are in full flow and mouth-watering selections of Swahili food are on offer in the shade provided by long gazebos. Aunties decked out in green or red sit selling anything from club phone cases to vuvuzelas. The contempt Yanga and Simba fans have for each other is one of twins who fight and play in equal measure.

Over past decades, the clubs had little, if any influence beyond Tanzania's borders and at best could be considered the biggest derby only in East Africa, the

Jubilant...Yanga supporters celebrate their crucial 2-1 derby victory against Simba

continent's least successful footballing region. But over the last few years, the Kariakoo Derby has become one of the most watched matches in the whole of Africa and in terms of passion, spectacle and cultural importance now rivals the fiercest derbies in North Africa.

That change started in 2016 with Simba's change in ownership model, a model which allowed for 49 per cent of the club to be bought by Mohamed Dewji, Tanzania's richest man and Africa's youngest billionaire. Dewji's investment brought near immediate success with the club returning to the African Champions League in 2018 for the first time in 15 years. They have been regular qualifiers since and claimed their biggest result in the competition in 2021 when they beat Africa's most successful club, Al Ahly of Egypt, 1-0 in the group stage.

Yanga responded, not by restructuring the model of their club but instead bringing in record investment in the form of sponsorships. However, the single most impactful investment came not from either club but from the league itself. In 2021, long-time rights holders to the Tanzania Premier League, Azam TV, signed a new TV deal worth $100 million over ten years, more than double what it paid for the previous deal.

Not only has that deal put money into Simba and Yanga's pockets, it has also improved the standards of the league as a whole both on and off the pitch. TV infrastructure has been installed at every ground, smaller teams have professionalised and now provide stiffer competition for the two giants.

> "If you're Tanzanian, you're either Simba or Yanga – there is no neutral"

Even the refereeing has drastically improved as with more eyeballs and camera angles bringing greater transparency, instances of corrupt officiating almost vanished overnight.

Not only that, but with Azam holding sole rights to the league, they can broadcast across the world. Ten years ago, the Tanzania Premier League was an obscure league in a nondescript corner of African football. Now it is the only league in Africa where you can watch every single match from anywhere in the world.

And the results have been borne out on the pitch. Simba are now Champions League regulars and in 2023 were one of the eight teams invited to play in the newly-created African Football League, a project first announced and supported by Gianni Infantino and FIFA.

Yanga made their return to continental competition in 2016 after an 18-year hiatus when they played in the CAF Confederation Cup (the equivalent of the Europa League). In 2022-23, they made an historic run to the final where they lost to USM Alger, before this season making a return to the Champions League where they, along with Simba, qualified for the quarter-finals. In fact, Tanzania was the only country to have two representatives in the last eight of the competition.

Where the remarkable growth of the two teams is seen best though is not in the club game but at international level. Prior to 2024, no player from Simba or Yanga had represented a national team outside of East Africa at the AFCON. But in this year's tournament in Ivory Coast, Yanga's Stephane Aziz Ki played every match for Burkina Faso, his team-mate Djigui Diarra was Mali's starting goalkeeper and Simba's Henoc Inonga Baka was Chancel Mbemba's centre-back partner in DR Congo's run to the semi-finals.

It's a truly remarkable rise from the backwaters of African football. As little as five years ago Yanga were in a position where, as one administrator put it: "We didn't even have enough money to eat". Now, thanks in part to April's 2-1 victory over their old rivals, they are celebrating a third consecutive Tanzanian league title.

As other leagues in Africa struggle to compete with European football for global attention, or fail to attract fans to stadiums because of government restrictions, the Kariakoo Derby is rapidly establishing itself as the biggest spectacle in African club football.

Festival atmosphere... the scenes outside the Benjamin Mkapa National Stadium before kick-off

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Police escort ...Fenerbahce players leave the pitch after beating Galatasaray 1-0

VIOLENCE OVERSHADOWS TURKISH TITLE RACE

A rock-solid backline proved the key building block as Galatasaray successfully defended their Super Lig title. In 38 top-flight fixtures, the Cimbom only conceded 26 goals, with long-serving Uruguayan goalkeeper Fernando Muslera amassing a remarkable 17 clean sheets.

Gala, under the astute stewardship of head coach Okan Buruk, fully deserved to claim their 24th league crown. Led by Argentine striker Mauro Icardi, who scooped the Golden Boot with 25 goals, they set new standards at the top of the table, finishing with a record-breaking points tally of 102, winning 33 games (another Turkish top-flight record), and especially productive in the second half of the season, winning 17 games in a row between January and May – a record that has every chance of standing the test of time.

Despite such impressive numbers, Galatasaray did suffer a scare in the penultimate round of fixtures, losing 1-0 on their own patch to closest rivals Fenerbahce in a hot-tempered derby. Suddenly, a six-point lead at the top of the table was reduced to three. But Buruk's men held firm, eventually sealing the deal with a 3-1 win at lowly Konyaspor.

It is to Fenerbahce's immense credit that they kept up. Outstanding on their travels, especially in a ten-game winning streak, and only losing once all season, they frustratingly came undone by a number of draws against inferior opponents – though in fairness, their tally of 99 points would usually be more than enough for top spot. League runners-up in each of the past two seasons, it is now ten years since Fener last struck championship gold.

Unfortunately, a thrilling title race was overshadowed as the image of the Turkish game took a beating. In December, the Super Lig was suspended for a week after Ankaragucu president Faruk Koca dashed onto the pitch and punched referee Halil Umut Meler at the end of a league match against Rizespor. Within a few days, Istanbulspor supremo Ecmel Faik Sarialioglu would ignite another bad behaviour storm, so incensed by an officiating call in an encounter with Trabzonspor that he ordered his team off, forcing a postponement.

In March, Trabzonspor fans stormed the pitch to brawl with security staff and Fenerbahce players. Fener chairman Ali Koc threatened to withdraw his club from the league but said it was the "least preferred option", with members eventually voting down the proposal. Fener were still protesting in mid-April, fielding their youth team in the Turkish Super Cup and walking off after 60 seconds with Koc earlier telling a news conference: "It is time for Turkish football to be reset." Undeniably true – although whether the appointment of Jose Mourinho as coach will help calm things down remains to be seen.

Nick Bidwell

Turkish champions ...Mauro Icardi leads the celebrations for Galatasaray

ANOTHER DRAMATIC CLIMAX

Few top-flight leagues do grandstand finishes quite like the Belgians. Last year, Toby Alderweireld's stoppage-time strike on the very last day of the season crowned Antwerp champions. This May, the denouement was almost as spectacular: Club Brugge simply needed a draw to top the table, but went 1-0 down to crosstown rivals Cercle Brugge with eight minutes of the season left. Cue drama and a VAR intervention. The ref chalked off the goal for offside in the build-up play and Club Brugge, with new manager Nicky Hayen, won their 19th league crown.

For the third season in a row, Union Saint-Gilloise missed out on the title by a whisker. The Brussels-based club lost their first four matches in the play-offs after finishing the regular season top, nine points ahead of Club Brugge – a tally that was halved at the start of the play-offs.

The existence of the play-offs remains controversial, but their ability to produce drama is undeniable. Still, cinematic endings can't brush over the myriad of problems in Belgian football: the lack of cost control by clubs, fan violence, poor refereeing, problematic owners and the underdevelopment of the women's game. Several women's teams have withdrawn from the top flight citing financial difficulties.

In the men's game, second-tier KV Oostende were declared bankrupt, with fans attending their stadium in early June to say farewell to the club and vent their dismay at previous owners Pacific Media Group, while the fate of Standard Liege, owned by Miami-based investment firm 777 Partners, remains precarious.

Results in continental competitions reflect the state of Belgian football. Belgian clubs increasingly struggle in the Europa League. Instead, they compete in the lowest tier of European club football, the Europa Conference League. Club Brugge reached the semi-finals against Italy's Fiorentina but lost 4-3 on aggregate.

Samindra Kunti

Pitch invasion... Club Brugge keeper Simon Mignolet

CROATIA

HAJDUK COLLAPSE AS DINAMO REIGN AGAIN

It should have been an exciting end to a curse-breaking season for Hajduk Split and their 19-year quest for domestic glory. The outcome, however, turned into a nightmare for big-name January signings Ivan Perisic, Josip Brekalo and co, as the finale to the Croatian league season saw arch-rivals Dinamo Zagreb claim yet another title.

Hajduk, table-toppers at the winter break, would eventually crash to third, mainly due to a springtime slump that saw them fall to four successive league defeats, including 1-0 losses to both Dinamo and fellow title rivals Rijeka.

The dynamics in which the glossy team of stars failed to even finish runners-up summarised the nature of the title race. Ultimately Dinamo's experience – sealing a seventh title in a row – made the difference, ahead of brimming youth in Rijeka, who were the most consistent team in terms of style.

Three of Rijeka's players lining up for Croatia at the Euros, and six overall from the Prva HNL, is somewhat testament to a quite memorable domestic season.

Juraj Vrdoljak

Open-top bus parade... champs Dinamo Zagreb

SERBIA

PARTIZAN HAND TITLE TO ETERNAL ENEMIES RED STAR

By winning their seventh league title in a row, Red Star Belgrade continued their utter domination of the Serbian SuperLiga. A look at the final table and an 18-point cushion over rivals Partizan suggests that it was a smooth journey, but that doesn't tell the full story.

After a 2-1 win in December's Eternal Derby, Partizan went into the winter break top of the league, one point ahead of their Belgrade rivals. This proved to be the last game of Red Star's Israeli coach Barak Bakhar, who arrived at the Belgrade Marakana last summer. He was replaced by the returning Vladan Milojevic, who had guided Red Star to back-to-back titles in his first spell in charge.

When the season resumed in February, Red Star, without the distraction of Champions League football, made no mistakes, notching up 16 wins and two draws. Partizan stayed in touch until April, when they went into free-fall, suffering four straight defeats – including a 3-2 setback in the Eternal Derby where they were 2-1 ahead with 88 minutes on the clock.

The reasons for the drop-off? The loss of key players, particularly Serbia Under-21 defender Mihajlo Ilic to Bologna; a loss of form for top scorer Matheus Saldanha, who netted 14 goals before Christmas then just three in the new year; a hapless change of coach in late April, with Igor Duljaj replaced by his assistant, Albert Nadj. As the season collapsed, so did the team's support, with ultras boycotting home games and demanding the resignation of the club's leadership.

Vladimir Novak

Champions again... Red Star Belgrade

MOTTA LIFTS BOLOGNA TO NEW HEIGHTS

There was a time when Bologna were the most important team in Italy – even more so than Juventus, Milan or Inter. In the 1930s and 1940s, the *Rossoblu* won the *Scudetto* four times (1935-36, 1936-37, 1938-39 and 1940-41) and two Mitropa Cups (1932 and 1934), the forerunner of today's Champions League.

They had a second golden age, between 1961 and 1964, winning the last of their seven league titles and a third Mitropa Cup, with the likes of legendary Italy midfielder Giacomo Bulgarelli and the Danish striker Harald Nielsen.

Now, 60 years after their last participation in the top continental competition, Bologna have qualified for the 2024-25 Champions League. In the intervening decades they experienced almost everything: two Italian Cups in the 1970s, a double-relegation down to Serie C in the 1980s, and a UEFA Cup semi-final appearance in 1999, with several promotions and relegations in between.

At the start of the 2023-24 season, European qualification was beyond most observers' expectations for Bologna – the Champions League was unthinkable. Yet, with expert coaching and smart recruitment, they achieved it.

Head coach Thiago Motta crafted a hugely impressive collective effort out of a squad of players carefully assembled by Giovanni Sartori, the resourceful technical director that made his name with Atalanta.

Historic achievement ...Bologna have never played in the Champions League

It is no coincidence that Bologna's fantastic season coincided with the explosion of previously unfulfilled talents like Joshua Zirkzee, Lewis Ferguson and Riccardo Calafiori, who, placed in the right context, achieved performances that earned them the attention of all the big teams in Europe.

It was also no great surprise when Motta was snapped up by Juventus at the end of the season to replace the sacked Massimiliano Allegri, and Bologna moved quickly to find his replacement: Vincenzo Italiano. The 46-year-old has previous when it comes to overachieving, having led Fiorentina to three cup finals in the last two years, but is yet to win silverware. Bologna will be happy as long as he can pick up where Motta left off.

Emanuele Giulianelli

SWITZERLAND'S FALLEN GIANTS

Swiss football has seen a rather dramatic changing of the guard in recent years. Between 2002 and 2017, FC Basel won 12 of the 16 top-flight league titles, including a run of eight in a row. Since then, the club have endured a barren run, with Young Boys winning six of the last seven trophies having not won it prior to that since 1986. Basel's fifth-place finish in 2022-23 was their lowest since 2000-01 – but things were about to get worse.

When the Swiss Super League, as part of a re-format, was split into the championship and relegation groups back in April, Basel and Grasshoppers, Switzerland's two most successful clubs, were in the bottom half.

Grasshoppers, who won the last of their record 27 titles back in 2002-03, have struggled for some time now – relegated for the first time in 68 years in 2019 – so slipping into the relegation play-offs was no great shock. They scraped survival by beating FC Thun, scoring a 97th-minute equaliser from the penalty spot in the first leg, then winning the tie with another stoppage-time goal in the second leg.

Fallen giants ...FC Basel

While Basel have been drifting for some time, this season was a shock to the system. Switzerland's most successful European club, qualifying every year since 2000 and reaching the Champions League group stage a record eight times, finished ninth in the regular season to drop into the relegation group. They were, perhaps, never in serious danger of suffering relegation – thanks in part to the struggles of both Grasshoppers and bottom club Stade Lausanne Ouchy – but alarm bells will be ringing.

Financial losses suffered during the pandemic caused issues, accelerated by mismanagement at board level. In October 2023, they conceded ten goals in four straight defeats without reply. By that point, they'd won just one game in 11 and sat bottom; it felt unprecedented.

Fabio Celestini replaced Heiko Vogel in the dugout and ultimately steered them to safety, but Basel are still searching for a way back to the top. In a further damning indictment, Switzerland went to the European Championship without a Basel player for the first time since Euro '96. It could be a long time until both they and Grasshoppers, Switzerland's two former powerhouse clubs, reassert themselves.

Harry De Cosemo

STURM GRAZ DETHRONE SALZBURG

Usurped...Sturm Graz celebrate at Salzburg's Red Bull Arena

After a decade of dominance by Red Bull Salzburg, Austria has a new champion following the success of Sturm Graz.

Sturm's first league title since 2011 – and fourth overall – came through a combination of stellar performances and an uncharacteristic wobble by Salzburg's energy drink-backed behemoth.

Despite not being able to go toe-to-toe with Red Bull financially, Sturm have smartly recruited several of their key players from Salzburg, including star midfielder Alexander Prass and defensive pair David Affengruber and Jusuf Gazibegovic.

Heading into the championship group after 22 regular games, when each team's points tally is halved, Sturm sat two points behind Salzburg.

Arguably, the most important result in the title run-in didn't even come in the league: a 4-3 victory in Salzburg in early April in the Austrian Cup semi-final proved psychologically decisive.

Perpetuating a dreadful run from the reigning champions, Salzburg then took just five points from a possible 18 in their next six games.

Seizing the initiative, Sturm won their next four on the bounce before returning to the Red Bull Arena in late April where, despite throwing away a two-goal lead, they emerged from the scene of their semi-final triumph with a crucial 2-2 draw.

Sturm drew their next two to take the title down to the final day, when a 2-0 victory over Austria Klagenfurt cemented an unassailable two-point advantage to add the title to the cup, secured following a 2-1 win over Rapid Vienna three weeks earlier.

Central to the success is manager Christian Ilzer. Since being appointed in July 2020, he has also led Sturm to the 2023 cup and two Bundesliga runners-up finishes.

As players and fans painted Graz black and white with an open-top bus parade, they will now look forward to playing in their first Champions League group stage in 24 years.

As for Salzburg, head coach Gerhard Struber paid for the failure with his job, sacked before the end of his first season, with Jurgen Klopp's former assistant Pep Lijnders arriving to replace him for 2024-25.

James Kelly

MOLDOVA

UNIQUE FORMAT HELPS PETROCUB END SHERIFF DOMINANCE

Red Bull Salzburg weren't the only side to see a long title-winning streak come to an end in 2023-24. In Moldova, Sheriff Tiraspol's run of eight Super Liga titles in a row was brought to an abrupt halt by first-time champions Petrocub Hincesti, who also won the cup to become the only Moldovan side other than Sheriff to do the double in the 21st century.

Sheriff, of course, had previously garnered international attention in 2021-22, famously beating Real Madrid at the Bernabeu in the Champions League group stage.

This surprising outcome can be partly explained by the unique format of the Moldovan league, which meant that Sheriff had no advantage at the turn of the year despite finishing six points clear at the top of the regular season. The eight-team Super Liga's format – in its second season under this guise – is such that the top six have their points wiped out before entering the championship round, so they all start on zero with ten games to decide the title.

Petrocub put together a brilliant unbeaten run in the championship round, all but sealing the title with a 2-1 victory against Sheriff to open up a five-point gap between the two with three games remaining. Another defeat, to third-placed Zimbru Chisinau, was the final nail in the coffin for Sheriff's hopes of a ninth straight title.

Instead, the trophy headed to Petrocub for the very first time, the only professional club in the tiny town of Hincesti. A shock result, undoubtedly, although Petrocub have finished second in each of the last three seasons.

Claim to fame...Sheriff famously won at the Bernabeu in 2021

Aiming to build on this season's success – and also emulate Sheriff's successful strategy of recruiting talent from Africa – Petrocub announced a partnership with an unnamed African company at the start of 2024, before appointing Nana Yaw Amponsah (former CEO of record Ghanaian champions Asante Kotoko) as their new club president.

Of course, the impact of that is yet to be felt, so it was a local core that delivered the title. Chief among them was captain and star striker Vladimir Ambros, whose return of ten goals and eight assists made him the best attacker in the league.

Defending the title will be a tough task, particularly given the league's format, but the days of Moldova being a one-club league appear to be over.

Neel Shelat

WISLA'S ROLLERCOASTER SEASON

Wisla Krakow became sensational winners of the Polish Cup in 2023-24, but supporters' euphoria was quickly followed by heartbreak.

With 13 league titles and five domestic cups, Wisla are one of the most decorated clubs in Poland but have endured some difficult recent years. On the verge of bankruptcy in 2019, the club was rescued by Jaroslaw Krolewski, an IT industry entrepreneur, academic and philanthropist. With the help of Wisla player Jakub Blaszczykowski, who returned to Krakow after many years abroad with Borussia Dortmund, Fiorentina and Wolfsburg, Krolewski set about rebuilding the team.

Yet, after a huge turnover of players as the club sought to get back on its feet, Wisla suffered relegation to the second tier in 2022. They made it to the play-offs in their first attempt at promotion back to the Ekstraklasa, but suffered a humiliating 4-1 defeat at home to minnows Puszcza.

In December last year, Krolewski took the controlling stake of shares and, as chairman, recruited Spanish coach Albert Rude. It was an appointment based on analysis done by Krolewski's data company Synerise, as well as a belief in the merits of Spanish football: Rude joined sporting director Kiko Ramirez and nine players as part of a growing cohort of Spaniards.

With this Spanish Armada, Wisla sensationally won the Polish Cup, beating top-flight sides 2-1 in the quarter-final, semis and final itself, where they overcame Pogon Szczecin after a stoppage-time equaliser and an extra-time winner.

Yet, perhaps nursing a post-cup hangover, Wisla then took only one point from their final four league matches to finish tenth, three points off the play-offs.

"We have exceeded the scale of emotions, both in a positive and negative sense," said Krolewski.

Rude and Ramirez have both since left the club and the squad is set for more changes. But Krolewski remains optimistic: "Wisla's situation is and will be [for] a while difficult in terms of finances, but not like a few years ago, when we had to be careful that the club would not go bankrupt from month to month."

Kazimierz Moskal, a former Wisla player and a promotion winner with LKS Lodz in 2023, was announced, for the third time as coach. "I'm back, now it's time for Wisla," he announced.

Dariusz Kurowski

Viva La Wisla... **Wisla supporters during the Polish Cup final** *Credit: Dariusz Kurowski*

ALBANIA

EGNATIA'S ROAD TO GLORY PAVED WITH TRAGEDY

In Roman times, Via Egnatia was the name of the road that, as a continuation of the Via Appia, connected the port of Durres, on the Adriatic Sea, to Byzantium, the modern Istanbul. That road gives the name to Egnatia, the side that won the Albanian top flight for the first time in 2023-24, pipping the holders and 17-time champions Partizani in the table and then the final.

"Our president was able to take Egnatia from the third division to win two cups and now the league in just three years of top flight", said goalkeeper Alen Sherri, who celebrated the victory of the Albanian Cup, with the club thus completing the domestic double, by proposing to his girlfriend on the pitch after the final whistle.

Tragedy...ex-Ghana forward Raphael Dwamena

The victory of the league was dedicated to Raphael Dwamena, the Ghanaian striker who tragically lost his life on the pitch playing for Egnatia in November: "We played every match for Rafa and this helped us to turn the pain into strength", said Sherri.

Emanuele Giulianelli

SCOTLAND

FALKIRK'S INVINCIBLE SEASON

Falkirk went the entire League One season unbeaten to return to the Scottish Championship after five seasons away.

A stellar return of 27 wins and nine draws ensured John McGlynn's Bairns wrote their names into Scottish football history, becoming the first invincible side over a 36+ game season outside the Old Firm.

Having scored 96 goals across the campaign, the 2022-23 Scottish Cup semi-finalists sealed the title with five games to spare, celebrating by thrashing Montrose 7-1 away from home at the end of March.

In May, McGlynn was named PFA Scotland Manager of the Year ahead of Celtic's double-winning Brendan Rodgers (more on page 46), while 24-year-old winger Callumn Morrison won League One Player of the Season after topping the scoring charts with 23 goals.

PFA Scotland Manager of the Year...Falkirk boss John McGlynn

After outplaying Championship winners Dundee United in November with a 4-2 victory in the Challenge Cup quarter-final, Falkirk will now look to push for a return to the Premiership for the first time since the 2009-10 campaign.

James Kelly

HISTORIC PROMOTIONS FROM 2.BUNDESLIGA

Over half a century after hosting the sailing regatta at the 1972 Olympics, the German coastal city of Kiel has another sporting claim to fame – as the home to Holstein Kiel, who will shortly become the 58th club to compete in the Bundesliga.

One of the most prominent amateur sides in the north of the country in the pre-Bundesliga period, Holstein had genuine top-flight pretensions twice before in recent times, losing in the play-offs to Wolfsburg in 2017-18 and Cologne in 2020-21. But literally no one thought they had a chance of a divisional upgrade this season, after the departure of no fewer than 16 players last summer, including influential skipper and centre-back Hauke Wahl and brilliant winger Fabian Reese.

It says everything about the calibre of the decision-makers at the Storks – and especially coach Marcel Rapp – that instead of a campaign of transition, the second-division runners-up spot was duly secured with the engine room of Lewis Holtby, Steven Skrzybski, Philipp Sander and Patrick Erras much to the fore.

Hamburg-based cult club St Pauli, an outfit synonymous with the party atmosphere at their Millerntor home ground and the radical politics of its fanbase, deservedly emerged as the leading light in 2.Bundesliga, pipping Holstein Kiel to the title. Absent from the Bundesliga since 2010-11, the St Pauli Nation not only had a sixth top-flight promotion to wildly celebrate; equally significant was the fact that the "Boys in Brown" ended 2023-24 well clear of Hamburg, the first time they had ever finished higher their city rivals.

All credit to highly impressive young coach Fabian Hurzeler, 31, whose well-balanced, dynamic side combined the meanest backline in the division with precise and attractive approach play. His exploits have led to Brighton securing his services for next season, and how well St Pauli fare in the Bundesliga could well come down to how suitably they replace him in the dugout.

If Fortuna Dusseldorf had kept their heads in the play-offs, a trio of second-division sides would have travelled all the way in the promotion wagon. After winning 3-0 at Bochum (who came 18th in the Bundesliga), the tie appeared done and dusted, only for a sensational reversal of fortune in the return, Bochum cancelling out the deficit before prevailing in a penalty shootout.

Nick Bidwell

Bundesliga-bound... Holstein Kiel players celebrate promotion

SPAIN

FALLEN GIANTS DEPORTIVO ON THE UP

Rarely mentioned in the same breath as Liverpool's stunning comebacks against Milan and Barcelona, or the latter's astonishing *remontada* against Paris Saint-Germain, Deportivo La Coruna's 5-4 aggregate win over Milan in the 2003-04 Champions League quarter-finals (a 4-1 away defeat followed by a 4-0 home win) is still among the competition's most wondrous turnarounds.

However, the word comeback has taken on a different meaning at Depor since 2020. Until recently, La Liga's 1999-2000 winners – then boasting stars like Dutch striker Roy Makaay, Spanish playmaker Fran and Brazilian quartet Mauro Silva, Djalminha, Donato and Flavio Conceicao – were battling to escape Spain's semi-professional third tier, a black hole of 102 regional names when they joined the mix.

Poor finances and a lack of direction had provided the backdrop to the Galicians' extraordinary slump. Two relegations between 2018 and 2020 nearly led to fourth-level football, narrowly avoided when the Spanish pyramid underwent restructuring.

Supporters have experienced pure agony. A cancelled final-day game against Fuenlabrada, who had players unavailable amid the COVID pandemic, controversially sealed the historic fall to the third division. Tight losses against Albacete and Castellon ended bids to bounce back.

So, when coach Imanol Idiakez's men were in relegation trouble last December, hope was scarce. But stellar form, unbeaten in their final 21 games, earned a first-place finish in the north group and promotion. A 6-3 aggregate win over Castellon – champions in the parallel southern league – won the category outright, reigniting positivity.

Deportivo hero... Lucas Perez re-joined his hometown club for the third time in 2023

It became real when ex-Arsenal striker Lucas Perez, back in his native city as captain and talisman, drilled home the free-kick to secure second-tier promotion against Barcelona Atletic. Veteran players Salva Sevilla, 40, and Mikel Balenziaga, 36, boosted their push. Homegrown stars such as David Mella are the future.

During away trips to play minnows, or when facing La Liga B-teams, some opposition supporters would say: "Depor shouldn't be in this league". Now they're not, and the 34,000-capacity Riazor, their confirmed home for another 25 years, is awaiting better days.

Henry Flynn

PARMA AND COMO BACK IN THE BIG TIME

One famous club, Parma, and another famous city, Como, will make welcome returns to Serie A next season as the dominant winners and runners-up of this year's Serie B. In front by December, Parma won the title with two games to spare, three points ahead of Como.

Coached by former Napoli and Juventus player Fabio Pecchia, Parma are yet another famous Italian name to have been rescued by US capital, having been bought by the American tycoon Kevin Krause in 2020. Currently, Milan, Roma and Bologna are also controlled by North American trust funds or corporations.

Parma's return to Serie A, three years after they were last relegated, represents a major success for Krause, a businessman with Italian roots who appears to have enthusiastically embraced the Parma cause.

A younger generation of fans may not realise, but back in the 1990s, Parma were one of the biggest names in Italian and European football. Twice winners of the UEFA Cup (1995 and 1999) and one-time winners of the European Cup Winners' Cup (1992), for much of that decade Parma were the only Serie A side to go stride for stride with the two strongest Italian clubs of the era, namely Milan and Juventus.

Those were the halcyon days when players of the ilk of Gianfranco Zola, Hernan Crespo, Hristo Stoichkov, Lilian Thuram, Tomas Brolin and Faustino Asprilla graced the Stadio Ennio Tardini. Iconic figures such as Milan coach Arrigo Sacchi and Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon also both broke into the big time at Parma.

The 2004 collapse of Parma paymasters Parmalat, the multi-national dairy giant, put the club on a downward spiral which saw it eventually collapse and then obliged to start off again from Serie D (amateur level) ten years later in 2014. By 2018, however, Parma had remarkably climbed straight back to Serie A with four successive promotions.

Serie B champions ...Parma celebrate promotion

Similarly, Como have also enjoyed a meteoric rise. As recently as five years ago, the club was struggling in Serie D, but now they are celebrating a return to Serie A 21 years after their relegation from the top flight.

To say that the club is very different now from what it was back in 2003 would be an understatement; who knows what Como supporters would have thought seeing names like shareholder Thierry Henry and Jamie Vardy in the stands of Sinigaglia stadium during the last match of the season to celebrate promotion.

Como coach... Cesc Fabregas

Perhaps it is no surprise. After all, the Indonesian brothers Robert and Michael Hartono have attracted several big names since buying the club in 2019. Cesc Fabregas ended his playing career there, before taking his first steps as a coach with the club. As the Spaniard does not yet have his UEFA Pro licence, he coaches the team in a shared role with ex-Wales coach Osian Roberts, with former Chelsea captain Dennis Wise overseeing operations as CEO.

The Hartono brothers are among the richest owners in Italian football, so this summer is likely to be filled with plenty of transfer activity and a few more big names arriving on the shores of Italy's most famous lake.

Paddy Agnew and Emanuele Giulianelli

AUSTRIAN GIANTS RETURN TO TOP FLIGHT

Twenty years on from winning an Austrian Bundesliga and cup double, Grazer AK returned to the country's top flight. Having heartbreakingly thrown away the title to Blau-Weiss Linz on the final day of last term, GAK bounced back to go one better this time around.

Sitting top of the second tier since mid-September, GAK ended ten points ahead of closest challengers Ried to mark the end of a tumultuous journey. The supporter-owned club were forced to restart in Austria's lowest division and have had to record seven promotions to re-reach the top flight they last graced 17 years ago.

Promotion will also see the top-flight renewal of the Graz derby. The city's two clubs met in this season's cup, with Sturm Graz prevailing 3-2, but haven't played in the top flight since GAK were relegated in 2006-07 after receiving a 28-point deduction for entering administration.

Historic...Grazer beat Liverpool in the 2004-05 Champions League

However, two decades after defeating Liverpool 1-0 at Anfield in a Champions League qualifier, GAK's large and loyal fanbase can dare to dream again.

James Kelly

BUSINESS AS USUAL

As Bayern Munich and Red Bull Salzburg both saw their eras of domestic dominance end at 11 and ten consecutive league titles respectively, Ludogorets established themselves as by far the most dominant league team in Europe after winning the **Bulgarian** league title for the 13th season in a row. If they retain it again in 2024-25, they will match the all-time European record, jointly held by Skonto Riga (Latvia) and Lincoln Red Imps (Gibraltar).

At one stage, **Azerbaijan**'s Qarabag also had that record in mind and, if it wasn't for a 90th-minute defeat on the final day of the 2020-21 season, they would now be celebrating their 11th title in a row. That won't trouble them though as they celebrate their third consecutive league crown and tenth in 11 years, 25 points ahead of their nearest rivals.

Neither Ludogorets or Qarabag won their leagues with as much authority as The New Saints won **Wales**' Premier League though, as the Oswestry-based side went the entire season unbeaten, winning 30 of their 32 games en route to their third consecutive title.

The recent struggles of FC Basel (see page 41) have paved the way for Young Boys of Bern to assert themselves as the top dogs in **Switzerland**, as they won their sixth title in seven years. Likewise, Rangers continue to trail Celtic in **Scotland**, as the Bhoys won their third title in a row and 12th in 13 years. Adding to their dominance, Brendan Rodgers' side also won the Scottish Cup.

Champions again ...Celtic celebrate with the Scottish Premiership trophy

In **Ukraine**, Shakhtar Donetsk continued to defy expectations by winning their third title in a row. Despite losing a number of their foreign players in the wake of Russia's invasion, the club has gone from strength to strength thanks to a number of homegrown stars, especially 21-year-old attacking midfielder Heorhiy Sudakov, who scored the goal that sealed the title in a 1-0 victory over Dynamo Kyiv towards the end of the season.

Elsewhere, both **Hungary** and **Slovakia**'s titles were retained once again, as Ferencvaros and Slovan Bratislava each won their sixth consecutive league titles.

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

In **Poland**, a year after Rakow Czestochowa won their first-ever league title, Jagiellonia Bialystok did exactly the same thing, pipping Slask Wroclaw to the crown on head-to-head goal difference.

There were first-time champions also in **Luxembourg** – where Differdange 03 finally got the their hands on the title after years of knocking on the door – and **Montenegro**. In the latter, FK Decic finished top just four years after winning promotion from the second tier. It was also the first season in Montenegrin history that neither of the traditional giants Buducnost or Sutjeska finished in the top two.

Larne proved that they are here to stay as the dominant club of **Northern Ireland** by retaining the league title,

Larne...NIFL champions

continuing a meteoric rise that began with a takeover by millionaire Kenny Bruce in 2018. This season's triumph was even more dominant than the last, as they collected 90 points and only lost twice all season.

Elsewhere, Borac Banja Luka in **Bosnia & Herzegovina** and **Slovenia**'s Celje each won their second titles in five seasons.

TRADITIONAL GIANTS BACK ON TOP

Romanian giants FCSB have endured a difficult time in recent years. Off the pitch, a legal dispute forced them to change their name from Steaua Bucharest, and on it, the Red and Blues finished runners-up an excruciating seven times in eight seasons since their last league title in 2014-15. That run was finally brought to an end this year, as they sealed their 27th title with three games to spare.

Maccabi Tel Aviv didn't have to wait quite so long to win the **Israel** Premier League – for a record 25th time – but were still relieved to end a sequence of three titles in a row for arch-rivals and 15-time champions Maccabi Haifa, who finished in second place, 11 points adrift.

Meanwhile in the **Czech Republic**, Sparta Prague defended the Czech First League title for the first time since 2000-01. For the second season in a row, the Maroons went toe-to-toe with Slavia Prague at the top of the table but, by winning their 14th crown, Sparta have now won twice as many Czech titles as their city rivals following the league's formation in 1993 after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. As a result of his title-winning exploits, manager Brian Priske replaced Arne Slot as Feyenoord coach.

Feyenoord-bound ...Brian Priske

LATE DRAMA SPARKS WILD SCENES

Several European leagues were settled in dramatic circumstances.

First, to **Russia**, where three teams had a shot at the title on the final day of the season, and two of them – Krasnodar and Dynamo Moscow – went head-to-head. Starting the day top, Dynamo knew that victory would give them their first-ever Russian Premier League crown, and first league title since 1976. But instead, a goal from Colombia striker Jhon Cordoba put Krasnodar in the driving seat, giving the 16-year-old club their shot at a first-ever trophy.

All they needed was for Zenit to drop points at home to Rostov and, with 84 minutes on the clock, the score was 1-1. But the defending champions were rescued by a goalkeeping howler, as Artur's shot squirmed past the Rostov keeper, sparking wild celebrations and bringing the title back to St Petersburg for a sixth straight year.

At the start of May, the top flight in **Denmark** could have gone any one of four ways, but by the final day that had been whittled down to just two: Brondby and Midtjylland. With the former ahead only on goal difference, Midtjylland had to better Brondby's result to win their fourth title.

After half an hour, Brondby were in dreamland: beating AGF Aarhus 1-0 while Midtjylland trailed 2-0 at home to Silkeborg. Even with an AGF equaliser, at half-time Brondby were on course to win the league by one point. But the picture was turned on its head within seven minutes of the restart, as Midtjylland came out firing and scored three quick goals to take the lead in both the match and the title race. When Brondby conceded again just before the hour mark, the title looked sewn up.

But the drama wasn't done yet as Brondby equalised five minutes later. Yet, by surging forward in search of the match-winner that would bring them the title, they were caught on the counter and conceded again. To add insult to injury, Midtjylland also conceded late on to draw 3-3, meaning that a point would have been enough for Brondby to take the trophy.

The fixture list in **Cyprus** could hardly have produced a more tense finale, as the two leading sides, APOEL and AEK Larnaca, met on the last day level on points. After nine minutes, the score was 1-1 and a classic appeared to be on the cards. But as it turned out, there were no further shots on target and APOEL took the title courtesy of their better head-to-head record, leaving AEK to curse a 92nd-minute equaliser they'd conceded in their previous game.

Neither the Maltese nor North Macedonian leagues quite made it to the final day, but were settled by top-of-the-table clashes in the penultimate games. Hamrun Spartans saw off Floriana in spectacular fashion, beating their rivals 5-0 away from home to seal the **Malta** Premier League. In **North Macedonia**, Struga and Shkendija each finished on 64 points, with the former sealing the trophy on their head-to-head record having won 2-0 against their rivals a week before the final day.

Match-winner... Zenit forward Artur celebrates scoring against Rostov

WEIGHT OF HISTORY GIVES REAL 15TH CROWN

Real Madrid's knowhow eventually overpowers determined Dortmund in Wembley final

European champions ...Real Madrid captain Nacho lifts the trophy

Who needs a super league? Real Madrid claimed membership for themselves alone by extending their haul of European crowns to 15. History was too powerful an opponent for a Borussia Dortmund wrecked emotionally and technically by those always-inevitable late goals.

Dani Carvajal, smallest man on the Wembley pitch, headed the first to spark the Dortmund implosion which presented Vinicius Junior with Madrid's second. Goalscorers grab the headlines and their achievements are written in the record books, but equally significant here was the defiance of goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois. The Belgian, fit too late to make his country's Euro 2024 squad, laid the foundations for glory with a sequence of fine saves before and after the interval.

Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo and Sir Alex Ferguson were among the admiring high-profile spectators who witnessed Madrid's latest triumph in the 69th final of the club world's most prestigious event. Remarkably, this was Madrid's first appearance in any of the eight Wembley finals. Victory was their fifth Champions League-La Liga double.

This story was – and is – all about a remarkable football dynasty. The Madrid of Paco Gento (Di Stefano-inspired, obviously) won six European Cups in 11 years, the Madrid of Fernando Hierro powered to three in five seasons, the Madrid of Cristiano Ronaldo four in five campaigns, and now the overlapping Madrid of Toni Kroos have celebrated a fifth in nine years.

Kylian Mbappe has arrived to strengthen the mix for the next era. Yet, at 25, he is a junior in terms of Champions League success despite being older than Vinicius Junior (shortly turning 24), Rodrygo (23), compatriot Eduardo Camavinga (21), and Aurelien Tchouameni (24) and Arda Guler (19) who both remained on the bench at Wembley. Not to forget Madrid's other new recruit Endrick (soon to turn 18), of which so much is expected.

So while the champions danced in delirium around Wembley, a further cascade of statistics and records awaits. Madrid's 18th appearance in the final was seven more than next-best Milan and their trophy collection more than double the *Rossoneri's* seven.

Rued miss...Niclas Fullkrug hits the post with a first-half shot

On an individual level, the retirement-bound Kroos, his substitute Luka Modric, captain Nacho and Carvajal matched old-timer Paco Gento's record of six winners' medals (though Gento, to honour his memory, played every minute of his finals in an era before substitutes and squad lists).

Individual record too for the imperturbable Carlo Ancelotti. He has won the cup five times as a coach – two with Milan, three with Madrid – in addition to his double as a Milan midfielder. No manic dancing around the technical area or frenzied dashes down the touchline for the Italian. His aura of cool self-assurance appears inspiration enough. More to Ancelotti than meets the eye. He masterminded this season's double despite the departure of attack leader Karim Benzema and serious injuries to David Alaba and Eder Militao as well as Courtois for so long.

Even Ancelotti may have been surprised by the first-season impact of Jude Bellingham. The 20-year-old cost Madrid a club-record €103m last summer from Dortmund, ironically, struck 23 goals in all competitions

including *Clasico* winners against Barcelona, was hailed La Liga Footballer of the Year and may collect even more individual awards if he continues to perform so impressively for both club and country in the rest of 2024.

All credit to Dortmund for chasing Madrid off their stride in the first half.

First, Karim Adeyemi ran clear behind the Madrid defence only for Courtois to force him wide; Niclas Fullkrug hit a post and saw the ball ricochet back across the face of goal; the quicksilver Adeyemi forced a sharp save from the Madrid keeper who then dived low to his right to beat away a low drive from Marcel Sabitzer. The other side of the interval saw Courtois pull off another crucial save to deny a diving header from Fullkrug.

Yet Real have made a habit of suffering adversity on their way through these crunch games and soon the warning signs were lighting up. Madrid had rearranged the midfield and a Kroos free-kick provided a first test for Gregor Kobel. The keeper saved at the expense of a corner from which Carvajal skimmed a header over the bar. Dortmund failed to heed the lesson. Rodrygo forced another left-wing corner, Kroos delivered once more and Carvajal sneaked in front of Fullkrug yet again to head home.

Now Madrid were on cruise control. Kroos, Camavinga, Bellingham and Nacho all threatened before the England youngster capitalised on Ian Maatsen's loss of focus and laid on a sixth Champions League goal of the season for Vinicius.

Dortmund will wonder all summer about how they let the match escape them. Glory was within their grasp but a repeat of the underdog upset against Juventus in 1997 proved beyond them. Mats Hummels and Marco Reus were Wembley losers again, as in 2013; loanee Jadon Sancho returned to Manchester United with "only" a runners-up medal.

The facts and figures should not detract from the Madrid mystique that invades their own players' psyche and undermines the opponent, no matter how late in the day. Wembley was no coincidence. Look beyond the victories over Manchester City and Bayern Munich, back a decade to the 2014 extra-time despatch of Atletico Madrid in Lisbon. As Ancelotti had said: "When you play against Real Madrid you play against history." The most powerful weapon of all, it seems.

Keir Radnedge

Opening goal...Dani Carvajal heads Real Madrid in front

> "These wins are all about the history and tradition of the club and, of course, the quality of the players"
> Real Madrid boss Carlo Ancelotti

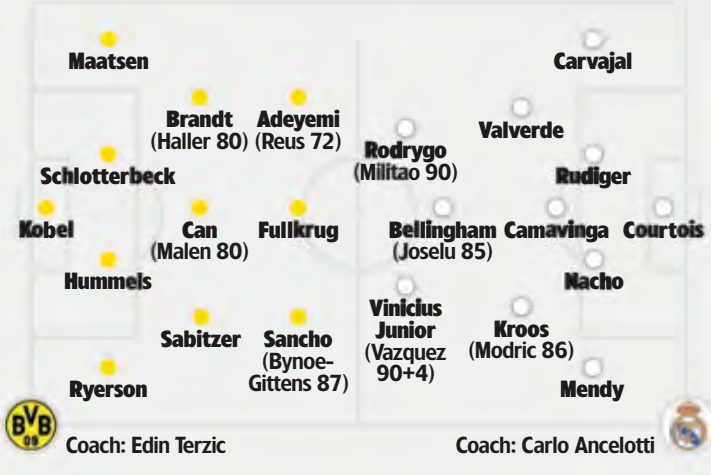
Decisive goal... Vinicius Jr. scores Real's second goal

2024 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL
June 1 – Wembley Stadium, London

BORUSSIA DORTMUND 0

REAL MADRID 2
(Carvajal 74, Vinicius Junior 83)

HT: 0-0 Ref: Slavko Vincic



Coach: Edin Terzic
Coach: Carlo Ancelotti

WHAT THEY SAID

CARLO ANCELOTTI
(Real Madrid coach)
"I never get used to this, because it was very difficult, more than expected. In the first half, we were a bit lazy and they played the way they wanted. In the second half, we were better, more balanced. A final is always like this. It seems a dream but it is reality. These wins are all about the history and tradition of the club and, of course, the quality of the players. The club is a family, we work altogether without problems and the atmosphere in the dressing room is really good. No big egos, everyone really humble. It was not difficult to manage the squad this season."

DANI CARVAJAL
(Real Madrid goalscorer)
"After the first half we didn't deserve to go into the changing room with the score level but this is football. This year I decided I would go forward for the corners and, as I always tell my family, determination is the key to my career. We had prepared the strategy just right."

EDIN TERZIC
(Borussia Dortmund coach)
"It was a fantastic journey this year in the Champions League, a great campaign. It's tough to find the right words. Performance-wise we played a great game, but we also found out why Madrid became European champions for the 15th time. They are always so effective and this is something we missed. I am proud we showed everyone that we came here not just to play a game but to win. We came very close. It was small things missing. Congratulations to Madrid. To keep this kind of hunger, to go and win it again, you see why they are the true champions."

MATS HUMMELS
(Borussia Dortmund defender)
"We had four chances and we should have scored one of them. We should also have defended better with their goals. But there is no one to blame for that. Madrid have been doing it like that for what seems 100 years."

ATALANTA END LEVERKUSEN'S UNBEATEN RUN

Atalanta lift the Europa League trophy by becoming the first team to beat Bayer Leverkusen in a year

Opener...players watch as Ademola Lookman scores Atalanta's first goal

Bayer Leverkusen were the heavy favourites and main event for many heading into this Europa League final. Their former nickname of "Neverkusen", borne out of the club's habit of missing out on silverware, had evolved into "Neverlusen" after a run of 51 games unbeaten. Just two finals separated Xabi Alonso's side from an entire season undefeated: Atalanta in the Europa League and second-tier Kaiserslautern in the German Cup.

Perhaps it's fitting that Atalanta are nicknamed *La Dea* – the Goddess – as many felt that they would need divine intervention to overcome this challenge. Their only major trophy had been the Coppa Italia in 1962-63, but that very competition had caused plenty of recent heartbreak with three final defeats in the last six seasons. The most recent of those had come just a week before this final in Dublin, when Dusan Vlahovic's fourth-minute goal gave Juventus the win.

Even so, *La Dea* had come through every tough scenario they had faced in the Europa League with aplomb. They topped a group containing Sporting, Sturm Graz and Rakow Czestochowa undefeated. The 2-1 victory and 1-1 draw against Ruben Amorim's Portuguese champions were repeated when they met again in the round of 16.

They then shocked Anfield – ending Jurgen Klopp's hopes of winning the Europa League as part of his Liverpool farewell – with a stunning 3-0 victory, making the 1-0 defeat in the return leg inconsequential.

The semi-finals pitted Gian Piero Gasperini's side against Marseille, drawing 1-1 at the Velodrome before another resounding 3-0 win in the

Europa League champions...Atalanta lift their first-ever European trophy

home leg to earn their place in Dublin.

Who can say whether *La Dea* had the footballing Gods on their side for the final – but they did have Ademola Lookman.

Atalanta had done a brilliant job of suffocating a Leverkusen side that had so often looked imperious this season and it took just 12 minutes for their reward to come. When Davide Zappacosta's low cross teasingly made its way across the box, Exequiel Palacios was caught flatfooted as Lookman ghosted in to clinically open the scoring.

A quarter of an hour later, Amine Adli's wayward header evaded all of his team-mates and landed at the feet of Lookman, the worst person possible from the German champions' point of view. Atalanta couldn't have asked for anything better, as the Nigeria international nutmegged Granit Xhaka and curved a beautiful effort into the bottom corner.

The *Werkself* had already worked themselves out of difficult situations during their Europa League run. Patrik Schick's goals in the 93rd and 98th minute of the last-16 second leg took Leverkusen past Qarabag, all three of their goals against West Ham United came in the 83rd minute or later, before two more late goals ensured they saw off Roma in the semi-final. Despite that, it was becoming apparent that Atalanta in the final would be a comeback too far – even for Xabi Alonso's specialists.

Alex Grimaldo had the opportunity to offer his side renewed hope, but the Spaniard couldn't lift the ball over Juan Musso as the goalkeeper raced out to shut him down. Musso then denied him again in the second half by decisively claiming Florian Wirtz's floated ball.

As had already been demonstrated, Lookman wasn't going to be denied, and the entire Aviva Stadium was left watching on in awe once again. With a quarter-hour remaining, he received the ball from Gianluca Scamacca and glided past Edmond Tapsoba before rifling an unstoppable strike into the top corner, becoming the first man to score a hat-trick in a one-legged European final since Pierino Prati for Milan in the 1969 European Cup.

Lookman rightfully stole the headlines, but there were fantastic Atalanta performances across the pitch with the midfield pairing of Ederson and Teun Koopmeiners putting in a particularly impressive shift. In the dugout, 66-year-old Gasperini had come up against the most talked-about head coach in Europe this season and convincingly emerged with the first major trophy of his career.

Hat-trick hero... Lookman scores his third goal of the final

Gasperini initially stood to the side with an expression of the purest pride when Berat Djimsiti lifted the trophy aloft and Musso fell to his knees with joy, before the manager took his own moment to get his hands on the silverware.

> Who can say whether *La Dea* had the footballing Gods on their side for the final – but they did have Ademola Lookman

That same pride he showed will have been felt by the Atalanta supporters that had made it to Dublin and those still in Bergamo, where Gasperini and his players solidified their status as eternal heroes.

Danny Lewis

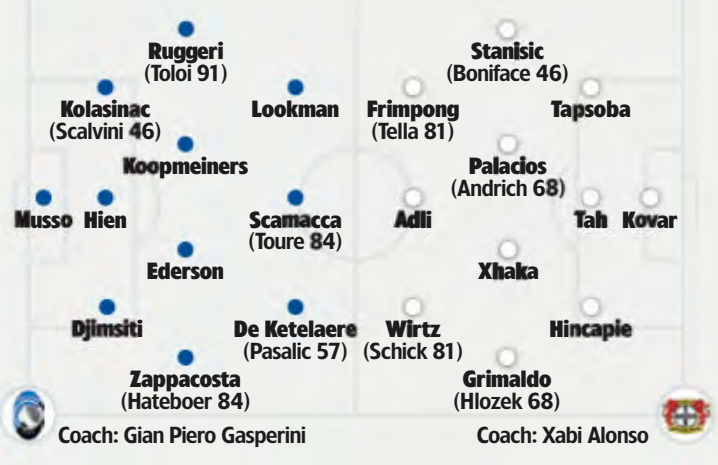
Dejected...Leverkusen players react to the final whistle

2024 EUROPA LEAGUE FINAL

May 22 – Aviva Stadium, Dublin

ATALANTA (Lookman 12, 26, 75)	**3**
BAYER LEVERKUSEN	**0**

HT: 2-0 Ref: Istvan Kovacs



Coach: Gian Piero Gasperini

Coach: Xabi Alonso

WHAT THEY SAID

GIAN PIERO GASPERINI
(Atalanta coach)
"Winning with Atalanta is one of those footballing fairy tales that rarely crop up. It gives scope for meritocracy: there is still scope for ideas and doesn't have to come down to cold, hard money."

ADEMOLA LOOKMAN
(Atalanta's match-winner)
"The past two years I've been able to take my game to a new level on a more consistent basis. Maybe it could have come earlier. But it's come now and I'm pleased with the progress I've made. This is just the beginning and I hope for more nights like this and to get better and better. That's the key."

XABI ALONSO
(Bayer Leverkusen coach)
"It hurts, for sure, but we need to live with this pain in a positive way. Try to transform it into good energy for the next thing. But it's football, the normality is not to get defeated in the 52nd game, normally you have much earlier in the season. So, it's been quite exceptional what we have achieved and we have to be really proud. Probably, we'll need some time but, for sure, today it's painful but it's deserved."

JONATHAN TAH
(Bayer Leverkusen captain)
"Huge disappointment, of course. When you've come this far, you want a different result. That's the mood. Nevertheless, we have to go on, we still have an important game. We have to allow the pain right now, but it will continue from tomorrow."

GREEK LEGENDS

Olympiacos become first Greek club to win UEFA trophy

Watching the joyous post-match scenes in Athens, it was hard to escape the fact that, for all their faults, UEFA's decision-makers do get some things right, and the introduction of the Europa Conference League is certainly one of those things.

The victors celebrating an historic night was not a one-off. This is the third season in a row that the Conference League winners have thoroughly enjoyed a rare evening in the spotlight. In becoming the first Greek side to win a senior men's UEFA club tournament, Olympiacos followed fellow history-makers West Ham United, who won their first trophy in over 40 years in 2023, and long-suffering Roma winning the inaugural trophy in 2022.

The wider impact on Greek football cannot be understated. Discussions of coefficients and league rankings may not set the pulses racing, but for countries like Greece, they are central to creating more nights like this. It was only 20 years ago that the Greek Super League was ranked the sixth best in Europe, with three teams in the 2003-04 Champions League group stage. Those three clubs – Olympiacos, Panathinaikos and AEK Athens – then provided the bulk of Greece's Euro 2004-winning squad.

The national team haven't qualified for a major tournament since 2014, while no Greek team has made it to the Champions League group stage since 2020, but this trophy ensures that two Greek clubs will enter qualifying for the Champions League in 2025-26, and offers hope of football being revitalised across the country. Not that Olympiacos supporters were overly concerned with improving the European prospects of their fellow Super League teams, as they revelled in winning the trophy at the home of their local rivals AEK.

For Fiorentina, this was yet another heartbreaking defeat – their third cup final loss in a little over a year, having lost in the same stage of the competition last season just a fortnight after losing the Coppa Italia final to Internazionale. In the history of the club, they have reached six European finals, and lost five of them.

If it wasn't for that weight of history, they could have been forgiven for thinking that this was to be their year. The Italian side had the kind of run to the final that can convince a team that they have their name written on the trophy, scoring eight goals in the 80th minute or later, including two in extra-time in the quarter-final victory over Viktoria Plzen.

Yet perhaps the mental scars of last year were too much to overcome. Eight of the team that started in the 2023

Historic...Olympiacos captain Kostas Fortounis lifts the Europa Conference League trophy

Disallowed...Nikola Milenkovic's first-half goal is ruled out for offside

Match-winning goal...Ayoub El Kaabi watches his header go into the net

final were in the XI in Athens, with Argentine centre-back Lucas Martinez Quarta promoted from the bench and loan signings Andrea Belotti (Roma) and Arthur (Juventus) also in the line-up.

Martinez Quarta's centre-back partner, Nikola Milenkovic, had the ball in the net after nine minutes, but his glancing shot was ruled out by an offside flag. It was a scruffy finish from a mishit cross, symptomatic of a game filled with enthusiasm but lacking in quality. Fiorentina's Giacomo Bonaventura and Olympiacos winger Daniel Podence tried to provide a spark, but the longer the game went on the more that nerves and fatigue replaced the energy and intensity that had defined the opening exchanges.

Fiorentina had the better chances, but profligacy has been a defining feature of their campaign. Although they were the joint-top scorers in the competition, they also had one of the least efficient attacks, averaging around ten shots for each of their 25 Conference League goals. In the final, they had a total of 17 efforts but hit the target with just four of them.

In contrast, Olympiacos' Ayoub El Kaabi was clinical just when his team needed him to be. Before Santiago Hezze's cross in the 116th minute, the Moroccan had precious little to feed on – just a couple of half-chances, one of which ended with him being clattered by Fiorentina keeper Pietro Terracciano. He was not about to waste his opportunity, pouncing on the bouncing ball inside the six-yard box to deftly glance a header into the back of the net and spark wild celebrations. It was his 11th goal of the tournament, adding to the five he'd scored in the Europa League (three in the group stage, two in the play-offs).

Fiorentina weren't done though, and moments later a clever one-two saw Jonathan Ikone bearing down on goal, only for three Olympiacos defenders to hurl themselves in the way of his shot. The ball was cleared, and that was that.

Amid all the talk of Greek heroes writing legends, a Spaniard quietly made history. A year after guiding Sevilla to the Europa League, Jose Luis Mendilibar became only the second manager to win a European club trophy with different clubs in successive seasons. Only Rafael Benitez, who won the UEFA Cup with Valencia in 2004 and the Champions League with Liverpool a year later, can claim the same record.

> This is the third season in a row that the Europa Conference League winners have thoroughly enjoyed a rare evening in the spotlight

Mercilessly sacked by Sevilla in October, Mendilibar has written himself into Olympiacos folklore. It will be a long time before he, El Kaabi and the rest will be forgotten.

Jamie Evans

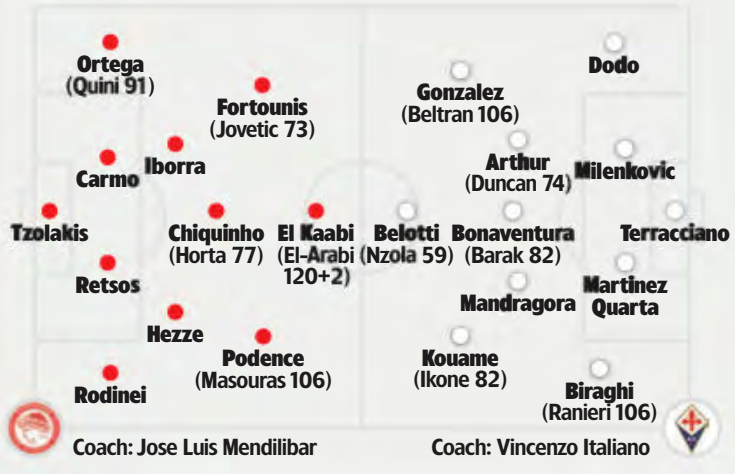
Wasteful... Fiorentina had chances to win the game

2024 EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE FINAL

May 29 – Agia Sophia Stadium, Athens

OLYMPIACOS (El Kaabi 116)	**1**
FIORENTINA	**0**

AET HT: 0-0 Ref: Artur Soares Dias



WHAT THEY SAID

JOSE LUIS MENDILIBAR
(Olympiacos coach)
"I feel immense joy and happiness that I have helped make the [Olympiacos fans] feel this way; I dedicate this victory to them. I am happy we have achieved something our club has never done before. We're going to celebrate it properly and then we're going to start working on what comes next.

"The good thing is that it's not just about thinking about Olympiacos, it's about thinking about Greek football. It will be very good for Greek football and for Greek people to believe more. Greek football has to believe more in itself.

"Everything has been very fast. I hope there is more time, and that in that time when I will be here, things continue to go well and this is not just a flash of a night or a short time. I hope this gives us time to be here for a long time and do very good things."

AYOUB EL KAABI
(Olympiacos' match-winner)
"We all won it together. We thank all of our people: we are all together, one family."

VINCENZO ITALIANO
(Fiorentina coach)
"It's disappointing for the second time. It's disappointing because again, we had many situations to score goals, but the lads did everything they could. I don't think we deserved to lose this game.

"It is a huge disappointment for me, because the third final we played the right way, but we still don't have the maturity, the know-how, that little extra to win in a one-off match.

"The team played the way a final should be played. We had chances to take the lead. You need to be clinical in these games, but they scored at the end. It's disappointing because it's difficult to go all the way in Europe and nobody has dominated us in the last two years.

"In games like this, losing leaves a bitter taste in your mouth. But we have laid a good foundation. Fiorentina have a lot of talented youngsters, and we have to pick up where we can improve. We had a good run but, once again, we fell just before the finishing line."

Record four in a row for City

Pep Guardiola's side sweep to unprecedented fourth consecutive Premier League title

Is there anything left to write about Manchester City that has not already been said? Yes, Pep Guardiola is a genius; yes, their squad is littered with talent and has been superbly constructed with excellent recruitment; yes, they have accrued and maintained a huge advantage over their rivals thanks to the wealth of their Abu Dhabi owners; and yes, the 115 charges from the Premier League continue to hang over their heads.

Their fourth consecutive league title – an unprecedented achievement in the history of English football – was greeted in some quarters with begrudging respect, in others with indifference. That quickly turned to anger when the club's hierarchy celebrated another title by taking the Premier League to court over Associated Party Transactions, which, they say, discriminate against the club's owners.

In the style of Ederson's howitzer of a left foot, City have booted all their off-field issues far downfield, ensuring that they continue to hang over the pitch for the foreseeable future, overshadowing their success. Which really ought to irritate City's star men as much as everyone else. Guardiola, Phil Foden, Rodri, Erling Haaland and the rest deserve to have their successes celebrated rather than have asterisks placed against them.

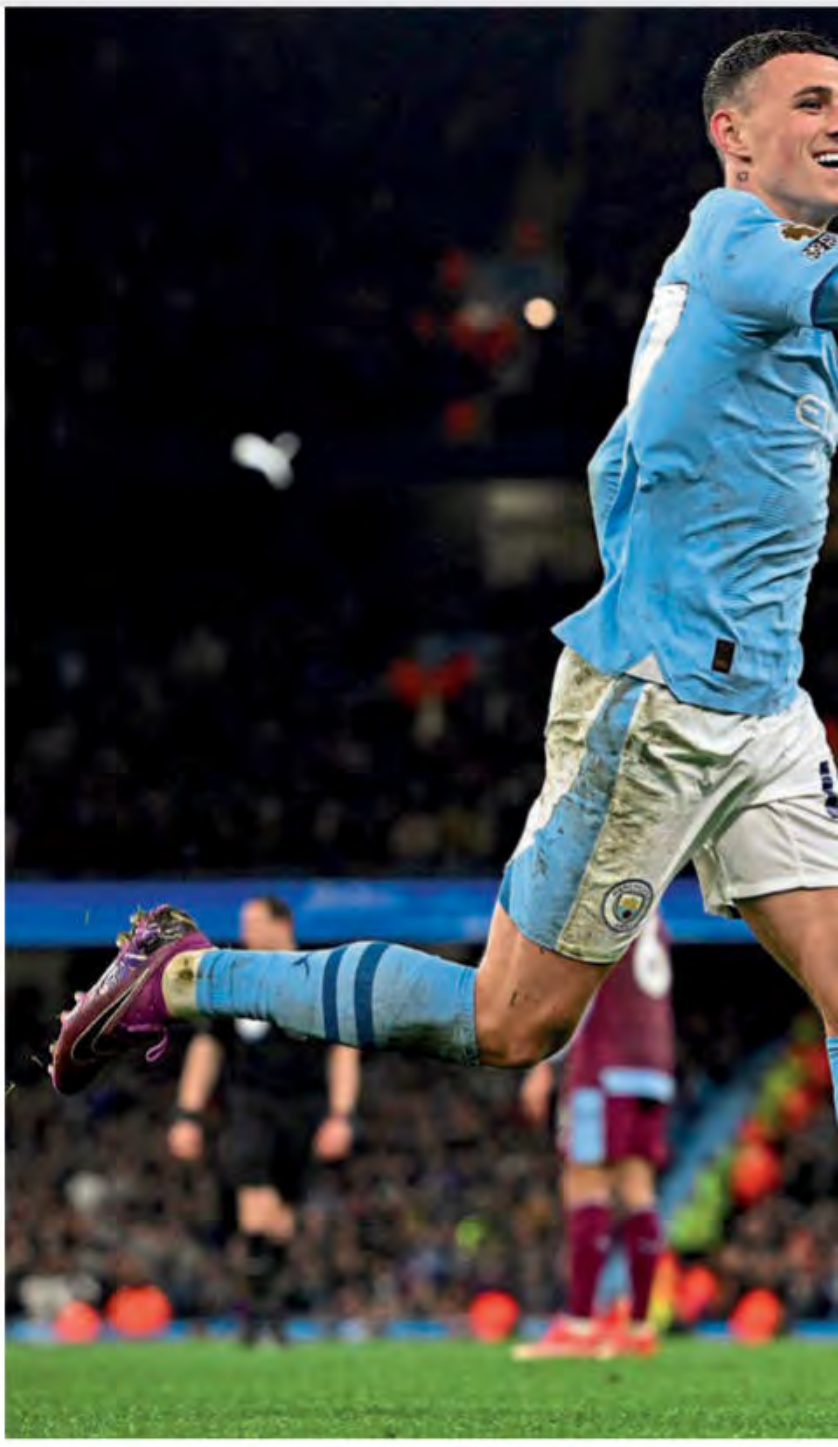
Runners-up...Arsenal pushed champions City close

As Jonathan Wilson argued in last month's *World Soccer*, Guardiola's unparalleled ability to evolve, to constantly find new tactical solutions, is central to his ability to continue dominating. Foden, long regarded as a huge talent, delivered his best season to date with 19 league goals and eight assists. Rodri set an extraordinary record by going 74 matches without losing, while Haaland retained his Golden Boot with 27 goals. The focus should be on their excellence, but City's owners make it hard to ignore the background noise.

If those off-field debates are hard to stomach for City's stars, spare a thought for their rivals. Arsenal produced a season's performance that would have been enough to win the title in most of the Premier League's other 31 seasons, including 2022-23. They even came out on top in the head-to-heads, beating City at home and drawing at the Etihad, yet still fell two points short.

Mikel Arteta's side, who possessed the league's best defence and were hugely improved by the arrival of Declan Rice, seem to be on the verge of something special – although major silverware needs to arrive soon.

They will take inspiration from the journey of Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool, who went toe-to-toe with City for a few years before finally winning the title in 2019-20. The German's reign at Anfield, which at one stage looked like it might end with as many as four trophies, ultimately concluded with something of a whimper, suggesting that his decision to step down was indeed the right one. His replacement, Arne Slot, has plenty to work with but plenty to improve.



Defining moment...Phil Foden celebrates scoring a hat-trick against Aston Villa

That might also be an apt description for the job that Mauricio Pochettino walked into at Chelsea last summer. The Blues' chaotic recruitment strategy gave the Argentine a difficult task and, as late as April, they were still in the bottom half. A late rally, guiding his young squad to sixth and European football, was one of the more underrated achievements of

THE BREAKDOWN

TEAM OF THE SEASON

CUP FINAL

It says something for City's recent dominance that **Manchester United** were cast in the role of plucky underdogs for the FA Cup final, and their 2-1 win may well have saved Erik ten Hag's job. **Liverpool** won the League Cup in February, beating Chelsea 1-0.

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS

After failing to claim a fifth Champions League spot, only England's top four – **Man City**, **Arsenal**, **Liverpool** and **Aston Villa** – will go to the group stage. **Man United**'s FA Cup win took them into the Europa League alongside **Tottenham**, while **Chelsea** head to the Conference League.

RELEGATED AND PROMOTED TEAMS

Luton, **Burnley** and **Sheffield United** going straight back down and the swift returns of **Leicester** and **Southampton** suggest a worryingly widening gap between the Premier League and Championship; **Ipswich Town**'s shock promotion offers a ray of hope.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON

Erling Haaland may have topped Manchester City's scoring charts, but it was **Phil Foden** that delivered for the champions when they really needed him. His hat-trick in April's 4-1 win over Aston Villa was a defining moment for him and the title race.

the year, but wasn't enough to keep him in a job. He was replaced by Leicester City's Championship-winning boss Enzo Maresca.

It would have been a shock to most fans in early May, as Chelsea leapfrogged Manchester United with a 5-0 win over West Ham before the Red Devils lost 4-0 at Crystal Palace, if they'd been told which of those two managers would still be in a job next season. Erik ten Hag's side regressed after an encouraging first season under the Dutchman, ultimately ending with their lowest-ever Premier League placing of eighth. In a season often defined by injuries, United were particularly badly affected, spending the majority of the campaign without a natural left-back and forced into using 14 different centre-back pairings. Even so, they rarely resembled a well-coached or improving team and, despite receiving a vote of confidence from the club's new co-owners, the Dutchman's job will be vulnerable if matters do not improve.

Likewise, Newcastle and Tottenham's campaigns were both undermined by injuries. For the former, this season was always likely to be something of a comedown after surprisingly qualifying for the Champions League last season. Spurs initially exceeded expectations by winning eight of their first ten games, before returning to the pack as the season progressed, but Ange Postecoglou has certainly brought a sense of fun back to North London after the dour years of Jose Mourinho and Antonio Conte. The standout game? November's 4-1 defeat to Chelsea, a scoreline which tells only a fraction of the story. Reduced to nine men, Spurs continued to attack with a frighteningly high line, and might even have nicked a win before conceding two goals deep into stoppage time. It is an approach that may not necessarily produce results or silverware, but it is undeniably entertaining.

Fond farewell... Jurgen Klopp

The Australian's arrival and impact is symptomatic of the Premier League's current status as the go-to destination for the world's most ambitious managers. The season ended with 13 different nationalities represented in the dugouts, with Crystal Palace's impressive Austrian boss Oliver Glasner the last of those to join, as coaches practically queue up to test themselves in the English top flight.

More new faces will arrive next season, as a familiar one says goodbye. Only Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger have managed more Premier League games than David Moyes, who stepped down from West Ham after four and a half years in charge. The 61-year-old was not always popular in East London, but will go down in the club's history books after winning the Europa Conference League in 2023. He will be back, somewhere, soon.

> City have booted all their off-field issues far downfield, ensuring that they continue to hang over the pitch for the foreseeable future

COACH OF THE SEASON
Occasionally, a manager and a club prove a perfect fit for each other, and so seems to be the case with **Unai Emery** and Aston Villa. The Villans overachieved significantly under the Basque coach by qualifying for the Champions League.

Overachieving...Aston Villa manager Unai Emery

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
For all their problems, Manchester United's academy continues to produce talent, as evidenced by the performances of **Kobbie Mainoo**. The teenager often provided the club's only positive from the base of midfield, while also chipping in with valuable goals.

Game of the season... Tottenham v Chelsea

Bellingham, the star of the show

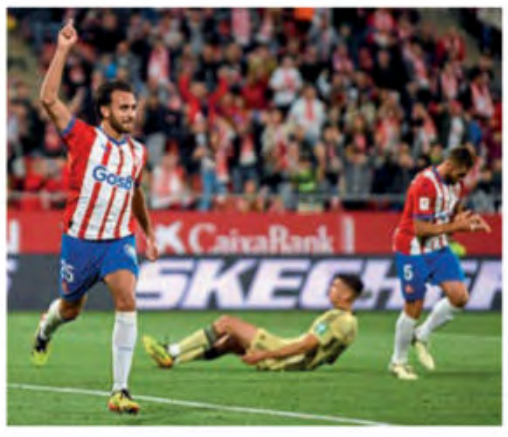
The Real Madrid sensation was La Liga's standout performer in the 2023-24 campaign

Jude Bellingham had just helped Real Madrid clinch their sixth Champions League trophy in 11 years with an assist for their second goal against Borussia Dortmund in the final at Wembley, but it was what he did after the game that left some fans speechless.

Put on the spot by *Real Madrid TV*, he conducted his first interview solely in Spanish, and to an impressive level too given his short time in the country – a feat that might have had David Beckham and Gareth Bale blushing.

Perhaps it's a marker of the consistently brilliant season he had that, by the end of it, his off-field talents would actually astonish more than his on-pitch display; fans have simply grown accustomed to his ability with a ball at his feet. What it definitely highlights is his desire to form a bond with the club and their supporters, ending the interview with their famous rally cry: *"Hala Madrid"*.

Hala Madrid, indeed. One league defeat all season, to city rivals Atletico Madrid in gameweek six, saw them finish ten points above their nearest challengers Barcelona, if you can even call them that.



Girona...La Liga's fairy-tale story of 2023-24

In reality, it ended up being a fairly stress-free final run-in for Real Madrid. Granted, Michel's daring Girona, who were playing only their fourth top-flight season ever, provided an exceptional narrative and were just two points behind *Los Blancos* after 22 gameweeks, but their February head-to-head ended 4-0 to Carlo Ancelotti's side. From there on, it was more of a canter than a race for the title.

Still, Girona fans can look forward to their first experience of Europe's elite competition next season after recording their best-ever La Liga finish, which included doing the league double over regional rivals Barcelona.

They also became the first team to break up the Madrid-Barcelona-Atletico top three in more than a decade – the latter finishing fourth to seal Champions League football for the 12th consecutive season.

Girona will be without star man Savio next season though, who finished ahead of Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo with the league's most successful dribbles, as he officially becomes a Manchester City player this summer.

More clubs are bound to be circling Girona's other standout performers too, with talented young full-backs Miguel Gutierrez and Yan Couto and Ukrainian forwards Artem Dovbyk and Viktor Tshyankov all said to be attracting interest.

For Real Madrid, Bellingham was the star of the show – only Villarreal's Alexander Sorloth and *Pichichi* winner Dovbyk bettered his 19 goals. Playing as a quasi false nine just behind Vinicius and Rodrygo, he was able to help fill the gap left behind by Karim Benzema, with last-minute winners in both *Clasico* clashes the "*guinda del pastel*" – cherry on top – of a spectacular debut season in Spain.

Hey Jude... Bellingham's celebration was a familiar sight

The England midfielder would be the first to admit that his side's success was a team effort, though – Dani Carvajal, promoted to the captaincy group last summer, edged Couto as the league's

THE BREAKDOWN

TEAM OF THE SEASON

CUP FINAL

Following a 1-1 draw, **Athletic Club** beat surprise finalists Mallorca 4-2 on penalties to clinch their 24th Copa del Rey title and their first major honour since 1984. The players celebrated the triumph by travelling 12 kilometres up the river Nervion on an historic barge.

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS

Real Madrid, **Barcelona**, **Girona** and **Atletico Madrid** clinched the Champions League spots, with **Athletic Club** and **Real Sociedad** qualifying for the Europa League and **Real Betis** earning a spot in the Conference League play-off round.

RELEGATED AND PROMOTED TEAMS

Almeria and **Granada** both finished on 21 points, with **Cadiz** joining them in the relegation zone after four years in the top tier. **Leganes** and **Real Valladolid** earned direct promotion from Segunda, with Real Oviedo and Espanyol contesting the play-off final.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON

A few players recorded more goal involvements, but none had more of an impact than **Jude Bellingham** in his debut season in Spain. This century, only three players (Cristiano Ronaldo, Ruud van Nistelrooy and Ronaldo) scored more in their first season with Real Madrid.

best right-back, Antonio Rudiger bore the weight of Real's centre-back injury crisis alongside the highly adaptable and equally impressive Aurelien Tchouameni, while Toni Kroos was faultless in his finale.

The German, who ended the season with a league-high 94.7 per cent pass completion rate, had the media on strings regarding his future at the club, before announcing his impending retirement ahead of the Champions League final, leaving Luka Modric as the club's elder statesman in midfield after the Croatian extended his stay in Spain for another year.

Kroos wasn't the only legendary La Liga midfielder to depart at the end of the campaign. Barcelona coach Xavi provided his personal rendition of the *Hokey Cokey*, first signing a contract extension in September, then announcing his intention to leave the "cruel and unpleasant" role in January, before being convinced to stay in April and then getting sacked in May.

His second full season in charge was equally as underwhelming for Barcelona supporters as it was overwhelming for the *mister*, who spoke of the emotional stresses of being Barca boss. It came across on the touchline, too – in his playing days he received just two red cards across 900 games for Barcelona and the Spanish national team, yet he was sent to the stands three times in 2023-24.

On the pitch, he was hoping to build on his side's 2022-23 title success but instead his team seemed to regress in style, with trial-and-error tactics and lack of a clear game plan denting their hopes both domestically and in Europe.

Speaking of former Barcelona bosses, Ernesto Valverde was among the contenders for Coach of the Year after helping Athletic Club record their highest league finish since 2015-16 and lift their first major trophy, the Copa del Rey, in 40 years.

The Basque club were one of the most exciting sides to watch in the second half of the season, with their infectious high-press and fast-paced style bringing back the best vibes to San Mames, where they lost just one game all season – to Real Madrid on the opening week.

In contrast, Almeria had to wait until the final game to notch their first and only home victory of the season. They were the first team to suffer relegation in 2023-24 – followed by Granada and then Cadiz – despite being the league's third biggest spenders last summer.

A final mention must go to Isco, who won 19 Man of the Match awards in just 28 league starts for Real Betis in an incredible career revival that likely would have seen him make Spain's European Championship squad if it wasn't for a fracture in his left leg.

> Girona provided an exceptional narrative and were just two points behind Real Madrid after 22 gameweeks

COACH OF THE SEASON
It might be a tad harsh on Carlo Ancelotti, whose title-winning side lost just once all season and ended with 95 points, but Girona's **Michel** deserves all the plaudits after an historic campaign with a squad who well over-performed their pre-season expectations.

Impressive...Girona head coach Michel

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
It goes without saying that **Jude Bellingham** has been the best newcomer to the league, but honourable mentions go to Barca starlets Lamine Yamal and Pau Cubarsi, and Girona's on-loan winger Savio.

Outstanding... Jude Bellingham

From Neverkusen to Neverlusen

Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen end Bayern Munich's 11-year Bundesliga dominance in exceptional and invincible style

It is difficult to say which was the most impressive aspect of Bayer Leverkusen's title win. Flawless in their pre-match analysis and war-gaming, breathtaking in their capacity for collective and individual execution, and blessed with the steeliest of team mindsets, Xabi Alonso's side achieved immortality in 2023-24, not only securing their first-ever German league title, but going undefeated throughout, the only invincible side in 60 years of Bundesliga history.

After 11 seasons of Bayern Munich dominance, it was always going to take something special to knock the Bavarians off their elevated perch, and the *Werkself* certainly produced the stuff of dreams, so masterly that they managed to win no fewer than 28 of their 34 fixtures.

Incredible to think that prior to his arrival at the BayArena in October 2022, Alonso had never taken charge of a professional first team. But what a root and branch transformation he has overseen in the Rhineland, turning a side previously infamous for inconsistency and reckless abandon into a thoroughly professional winning machine.

Alonso's natural and inspirational authority as a winner stems from his magnificent playing career, his outstanding work as a defensive midfielder for Liverpool, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and Spain, for whom he picked up every top honour in the game. The Leverkusen squad, delighted to be willing accomplices, soaked up every word of his discourse and in no time at all, an altogether new team emerged, one with much more structure on the pitch and far more pronounced will-to-win.

Few teams adhere to the old adage "they never know when they're beaten" quite like Leverkusen. In the 2023-24 campaign, they scored 15 goals in all competitions in stoppage time, and 33 after the 80-minute mark.

Few other clubs in Europe cut such an impressive figure as Leverkusen this season. Brilliant at keeping possession and maintaining control, so explosive in attacking mode – the incisive tone usually set by outstanding creative director Florian Wirtz and marauding wing-backs Alex Grimaldo and Jeremie Frimpong – extremely flexible tactically, ferocious exponents of *Gegenpressing* and vastly improved when defending deep. In short, they had no weaknesses, a tribute to Alonso's obsessive attention to detail and ability to communicate with his players.

Leverkusen legend... Xabi Alonso

Top marks should also go to Leverkusen's head of recruitment, managing director Simon Rolfes, who back in the summer of 2023, resolved all of the club's problem positions in the transfer market. Veteran Switzerland international Granit Xhaka came in

THE BREAKDOWN

TEAM OF THE SEASON

CUP FINAL
Granit Xhaka struck the only goal of the game as **Bayer Leverkusen** completed the domestic double with victory over second-tier side Kaiserslautern, despite playing the entire second half with ten men following Odilon Kossonou's red card.

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS
Bayer Leverkusen, **Stuttgart**, **Bayern Munich**, **RB Leipzig** and **Borussia Dortmund** earned a Champions League berth. **Eintracht Frankfurt** and **Hoffenheim** will compete in the Europa League, and **Heidenheim** in the Conference League.

RELEGATED AND PROMOTED TEAMS
Darmstadt and **Cologne** fell through the Bundesliga trapdoor, to be replaced by the promoted northern duo of second-tier champions **St Pauli** and runners-up **Holstein Kiel**, the latter of whom have never previously played in the top flight.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
After leaving Arsenal last summer following seven years in England, former Borussia M'Gladbach midfield maestro **Granit Xhaka** returned to Germany in some style. He shone all season at the BayArena as the team's key strategist, the on-field extension of coach Xabi Alonso.

Invincible... Leverkusen players celebrate during February's 3-0 victory over Bayern Munich

Bundesliga top scorer...Harry Kane's 36 goals weren't enough for Bayern Munich

from Arsenal to provide ballast and intelligence in the engine room; the ex-Benfica left wing-back Grimaldo delivered his own unique brand of roving influence, assist-making and set-piece accuracy; and Nigeria forward Victor Boniface – acquired from Belgian outfit Union Saint-Gilloise – weighed in with 14 vital Bundesliga goals, an excellent return for someone who spent three months on the sidelines early this year with a groin injury.

For Bayern, who finished the season a whopping 18 points adrift of Leverkusen and finally had to make do with third place in the standings, it was a dramatic fall from grace. While Harry Kane settled in immediately after arriving in Germany from Tottenham – netting an incredible 36 goals to top the national scoring charts – too many of the moving parts at the Allianz Arena simply seized up. At right-back, central defence and midfield, the cupboard was, for the most part, bare; one often had the impression that a sizeable portion of the squad were not busting a gut, possibly reacting to the abrasive man-management style of coach Thomas Tuchel with a spot of quiet quitting.

Tuchel received his marching orders as early as February, though he was "allowed" to stay on until the end of the season. Not that he was solely to blame for Bayern's plight. For at least a couple of years now, complacency has been accumulating in all quarters in Munich.

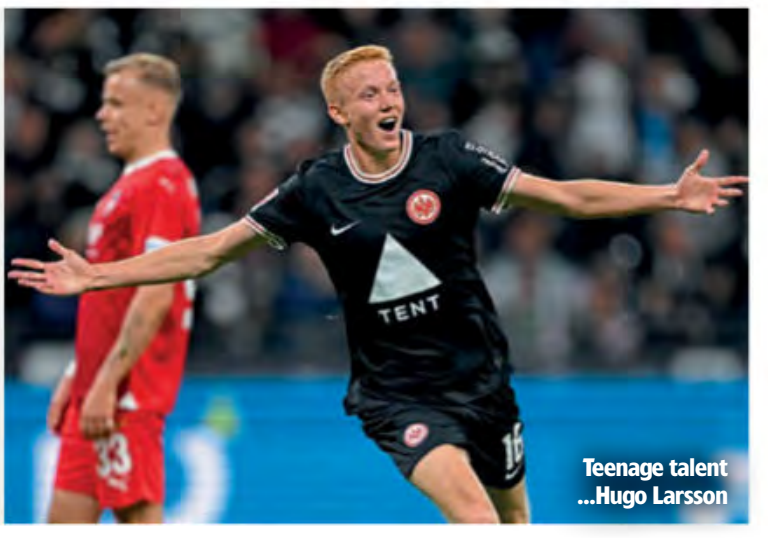
In marked contrast to Bayern, Stuttgart wrung every last drop of potential from their largely unheralded ranks, sensationally overachieving as league runners-up. Just 12 months ago, Stuttgart narrowly avoided relegation; now they and their impressive young coach Sebastian Hoeness have the Champions League to look forward to for the first time since 2009-10.

Few other clubs in Europe cut such an impressive figure as Bayer Leverkusen this season

Leverkusen's midfield maestro...Granit Xhaka

COACH OF THE SEASON
Xabi Alonso. In the space of 18 months, the brilliant young Basque coach has gone from rookie boss to the hottest property in world football management, recently resisting several lucrative job offers to stay at the BayArena.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
19-year-old Sweden defensive midfielder **Hugo Larsson** proved an instant hit at Eintracht Frankfurt following a move from Malmo. Only rarely do teenagers play with such intelligence, awareness and eye for a killer pass.



Teenage talent ...Hugo Larsson

Inter cruise to title number 20

Simone Inzaghi's Internazionale shrug off all challengers before sealing the Serie A title in style against their biggest rivals

Monday, April 22, 2024 was a day that many Internazionale supporters had written into their diaries months ahead of time. As Inter's triumphant cavalcade towards a 20th Serie A title picked up seemingly irresistible momentum through the springtime, it became clear that not only would April 22 be the day when Inter could mathematically wrap up the title, they could do so against their long-time city rivals Milan.

So it proved to be. Inter's 2-1 victory at the San Siro saw them seal the title with five games to spare on a cold and wet evening when the inclement conditions did little to dampen Inter enthusiasm. To some extent, Inter's march to victory recalled that of Napoli a year earlier.

It was not so much a matter of if they would win the *Scudetto* as when.

World-class coach...Simone Inzaghi

In the end, their dominance was even more devastating than that of Napoli in 2022-23. Inter ended the campaign 19 points ahead of their closest rivals – Milan, of course. Last season, Napoli had finished 16 points clear of surprise runners-up Lazio.

In a sense, the intense city rivalry underpinned Inter's dominant season. First definitive signs that Inter would be a problem for everyone came last September when they drubbed Milan 5-1 in the first derby of the season. Both teams had made good starts to the campaign, winning their first three games, so the emphatic Inter win seemed auspicious.

Perhaps the next crucial indicator came early in February when Inter beat Juventus 1-0 at the San Siro. At the time, Juve had appeared capable of making a fight of it for the title and had come into the game just one point behind Inter in second place. Juve, however, were re-dimensioned by the defeat which left Inter with a four-point lead and a game in hand. Little wonder that Turin daily *La Stampa* commented: "Even if it is not over until it is over, and there is always the risk of something unimaginable, Inter already have their hands on the title, and do so with merit..."

In a campaign when they averaged 75,000 fans at the San Siro, and when captain Lautaro Martinez closed the season as leading scorer in Serie A on 24 goals, eight more than second-placed Dusan Vlahovic of Juventus,

***Campioni*...Inter players celebrate after sealing their 20th *Scudetto* with a 2-1 win over Milan**

Inter's only disappointment came in the Champions League where they were eliminated in a penalty shootout by Atletico Madrid in the last 16. In all probability, Inter had only themselves to blame, having gone two goals clear on aggregate of Atletico in the return

THE BREAKDOWN

TEAM OF THE SEASON

ITALIAN CUP FINAL

This final is likely to pass into football history, not so much for **Juventus**' 15th Coppa Italia victory but for their coach Massimiliano Allegri's remarkable explosion of anger late on. The outburst saw him sacked by the club, replaced by Bologna's Thiago Motta.

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS

Bologna will play in the Champions League for the first time, joining **Inter**, **Milan**, **Juventus** and **Atalanta**, with **Roma** and **Lazio** in the Europa League, and two-time runners-up **Fiorentina** having a third crack at the Conference League.

RELEGATED AND PROMOTED TEAMS

Salernitana went down with a whimper, winning just two league games all season. **Sassuolo**'s 11-year spell in Serie A came to an end, and **Frosinone** went down after a final-day defeat. **Parma** and **Como** came up from Serie B, as do play-off winners **Venezia**.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON

With 24 goals, **Lautaro Martinez** enjoyed his most prolific league season and captained Inter to the title. Fellow Argentine and former Inter striker Diego Milito says simply: "He is an extraordinary player who scores, who battles for his team, a real leader."

leg before conceding two goals for a 2-2 draw and subsequent shootout.

Italian football did compensate, at least partly, for that disappointment thanks to Atalanta's sparkling 3-0 triumph over hitherto season-long unbeaten German champions Bayer Leverkusen in the Europa League final.

Making reparations in the 2024-25 Champions League will doubtless come right at the top of the Inter seasonal agenda next year. Before that, however, the club will have to overcome uncertainty about its immediate future following a change of ownership in late May. US investment fund Oaktree announced itself as the new owner of Inter after previous owners, Chinese multi-national Suning, failed to pay off a €395 million debt on money borrowed three years ago in the wake of a crisis prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As of May 22, 2024, funds managed by Oaktree Capital Management, LP own FC Internazionale Milano," Oaktree said in a statement.

The change of ownership, which has been "in the air" for some time, will clearly herald a period of relative uncertainty. The good news for Inter fans is that club CEO, Beppe Marotta, who has been a key figure in the creation of what is now the most powerful team in the land, is likely to remain a key figure in the transitional period of ownership change.

Suning leave after eight highly successful years which saw Inter win two league titles (2021, 2024), two Italian Cups (2022, 2023) and three Italian Super Cups (2021, 2022 and 2023) not to mention two losing European finals (Europa League in 2020, beaten by Sevilla, and last year's Champions League, lost to Manchester City). The club's young president, 32-year-old Steven Zhang, had said that Suning wanted to put Inter back at the top table of European football and, to a large extent, they managed just that.

Suning also leave behind a formidable squad, brilliantly handled and coached by Simone Inzaghi, who has clearly entered the thin oxygen zone of world-class coaches. Defenders Francesco Acerbi, Federico Dimarco and Matteo Darmian, midfielders Nicolo Barella and Armenian Henrikh Mkhitaryan, Turkish playmaker Hakan Calhanoglu, French newcomer Marcus Thuram and, above all, captain and central striker Martinez are all among the best Serie A has to offer.

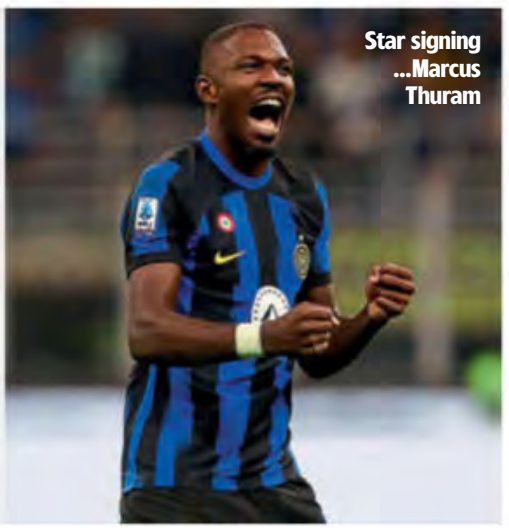
Simone Inzaghi has clearly entered the thin oxygen zone of world-class coaches

***Capocannoniere*...top scorer Lautaro Martinez**

COACH OF THE SEASON
In qualifying Bologna for the Champions League, **Thiago Motta** pulled off a minor miracle. Their intelligent possession football, organisation and work-rate owe everything to him. Taking on Europe's best with a new coach will be tough.

Juventus-bound ...Thiago Motta

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Not only did **Marcus Thuram** score 13 goals for Inter in his first season in Italy after joining from Borussia M'Gladbach last summer, but alongside captain Martinez he also made a vital contribution to Inter's title win.



Star signing ...Marcus Thuram

PSG's age of dominance continues

Paris giants win their third consecutive Ligue 1 crown in Kylian Mbappe's final season

"The star is the collective," proclaimed club president Nasser Al Khelaifi as Paris Saint-Germain wrapped up their third-successive Ligue 1 title, underlined their dominance by winning the two remaining domestic trophies, and reached a Champions League semi-final for the first time in three years. This season, branded as "transitional" by the club's hierarchy, will of course be remembered as the epilogue of Kylian Mbappe's seven-year stay at PSG – a chapter that was almost never written, and the official end of the unyielding "bling-bling" era.

Left out of the pre-season tour and the first game of the Ligue 1 campaign, the France captain was then re-integrated into the first-team set-up, "saved" by Luis Campos and Luis Enrique, as he himself described it. He would go on to score 27 Ligue 1 goals, delivering another Ligue 1 title and winning the league's Golden Boot for the sixth successive season. But, by his own admission, it wasn't his finest campaign and despite his considerable statistical contribution, he felt like an accessory to PSG's success, not the reason behind it.

Instead, it was the authoritative Luis Enrique who eclipsed Mbappe in this new iteration of PSG that is shedding itself of its stars and putting the manager at the heart of the project – as it should be. Whilst the Spaniard's predecessors were subservient to the whims of the biggest personalities in the dressing room, Luis Enrique made the big calls and was empowered to do so. His decision to relegate the departing Mbappe to a bit-part player – a justified one – was not met with internal opposition. The post-Mbappe era was being prepared for with the Frenchman still at the club, oftentimes looking on from the bench.

It was *Les Parisiens*' early form that allowed for the withdrawal of Mbappe to be without consequence; by February, the title was all-but assured. Monaco made an early statement, netting 15 goals in their first five matches, but their defensive fragility and home form put paid to their challenge.

Madrid-bound... Kylian Mbappe

Nice faced the opposite issue. The best defence in France and the fourth-best in Europe's top-five divisions, but Francesco Farioli, in his one and only season at the club, failed to find the solutions in attack. Struggling to blow teams away, *Le Gym* began to fall the wrong side of fine margins around the turn of the year. Their title charge fell by the wayside, as did their Champions League hopes.

THE BREAKDOWN

TEAM OF THE SEASON

CUP FINAL

The French Cup has become a competition for the underdog with Toulouse and Nantes winning the most recent editions. But not this year, as **PSG** beat three of Ligue 1's top six, including Lyon in the final, to lift the trophy, underlining their domestic dominance.

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS

With the expanded Champions League format, **Brest** join **PSG** and **Monaco** in automatically qualifying for next year's competition, with **Lille** in the play-offs. **Nice** and **Lyon** will compete in the Europa League and **Lens** head into the Conference League.

Impressive... third-placed Brest

RELEGATED AND PROMOTED TEAMS

Cash-strapped **Clermont**'s three-year stint in Ligue 1 came to an end after a bottom-place finish, and they are joined in Ligue 2 by **Lorient** and **Metz**. Yo-yo clubs **Auxerre** and **Angers** return, as do **Saint-Etienne** – a fallen giant back on the rise.

Champions... PSG captain Marquinhos lifts the Ligue 1 trophy

Kylian Mbappe felt like an accessory to PSG's success, not the reason behind it

With perennial challengers and fierce rivals Marseille – who went through three managers in a turbulent year – nowhere to be seen, PSG sauntered to the title, despite recording their worst points-per-game average since 2015.

Marseille's shock drop-off, as well as that of Rennes and Lens, provided Brest, tipped by many for relegation, to secure an unlikely qualification for next season's Champions League.

The complementarity of sporting director Gregory Lorenzi and head coach Eric Roy has been the driving force for *Les Pirates*' historic fairy-tale season, but with European football on the horizon for the first-time ever next season, bigger challenges await.

Just behind them, Lille, who have already lost Paulo Fonseca, could see their youthful and talented side picked apart this summer. *Les Dogues*, who swiftly appointed Bruno Genesio as a replacement, aren't the only ones approaching next season with a new manager; five out of Ligue 1's top ten will see a new man in the dugout come August – some of those changes have been enforced, others by choice.

After burning through Laurent Blanc and Fabio Grosso at the start of the season, Lyon won't be making another managerial appointment having struck third time lucky with Pierre Sage. He inherited a team rock-bottom of Ligue 1 in December, and as recently as February they were still in the relegation zone. However, by May, they were up to fifth and in the French Cup final. If a team ever had a season of two halves, it was Lyon.

Les Gones comfortably beat the drop but Clermont, in Pascal Gastien's final season in charge, did not. They are joined in Ligue 2 by Lorient and Metz, both of whom were too reliant on individual brilliance, which was in too short supply; Nantes, Le Havre and a youthful Strasbourg side led by Patrick Vieira can perhaps count themselves lucky.

All of those bottom-half teams will look to emulate Brest next season by defying the odds and mounting an assault on the top half of Ligue 1.

Others will have their sights set higher; PSG, without their stars, are heading into the unknown and their rivals may smell blood. However, Luis Enrique, the new star in the City of Light, is certainly well enough equipped to prolong *Les Parisiens*' age of dominance.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
No player was as fundamental to a team's success as **Pierre Lees-Melou** was to Brest's. The combative midfielder is enjoying a mid-career revival, laying the groundwork to drive Brest towards an historic Champions League qualification.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Eyebrows were raised when **Eric Roy**, out of management since 2011, took charge of a Brest side in the drop zone last season. But having saved them from relegation, he then developed a squad of journeymen and stars of unrealised potential into shock Champions League challengers.

Miracle worker... Brest boss Eric Roy

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Wilfried Singo wasn't Monaco's most high-profile signing of the summer but he soon garnered the most praise with consistently solid defensive displays, punctuated by moments of pure brilliance, leading the Principality club to second place.

Star signing... Wilfried Singo

Sporting scale new heights

Ruben Amorim leads record-breaking Sporting to the top of Portuguese football

Sporting won their second Portuguese championship title in four seasons at a canter, finishing ten and 18 points ahead of rivals Benfica and Porto respectively. The triumph consolidates the standing of Ruben Amorim as the most exciting young Portuguese manager since Jose Mourinho burst onto the scene two decades ago.

Under Amorim, the Lisbon club have won as many league titles in four seasons as they did in the previous 38. While the 2020-21 victory was based on a watertight defence and narrow wins, this Sporting team has evolved and flourished into an unstoppable multi-faceted attacking outfit.

"This is the team that plays the best football since I've been here," said Amorim. "It has different facets that makes it a more unpredictable side. It's the most complete in all phases of play."

Sporting's thrilling offensive game made it not only the best version of the team under the 39-year-old coach, but one of the most exciting and deadly in recent years in Portugal, as reflected in the statistics. Sporting hit 141 goals in 54 matches in all competitions, never failing to find the net in the league. The Lions also clocked up their highest number of victories in a single league campaign (winning 29 of 34 games), accumulated their highest points total (90) and won every one of their home games, which was also a club first.

Individual brilliance...Angel Di Maria's displays weren't enough for runners-up Benfica

A huge contribution to the goalscoring capacity can be attributed to number nine Viktor Gyokeres. Eyebrows were raised when Sporting smashed their transfer record on a Swedish striker playing in the English second tier, but the fee of around €24 million proved money well spent. Gyokeres was a force of nature, bullying defences from north to south of Portugal on his way to 43 goals in all competitions, his unremitting energy ensuring there was no let-up from his team-mates throughout the season. While Gyokeres was the star of the show, other individuals enjoyed magnificent seasons, notably midfielder Pedro Goncalves, rejuvenated winger Francisco Trincao and midfield enforcer Morten Hjulmand, another hugely successful summer recruit.

Above all else, Amorim's brilliant management was reflected in the fact that practically the entire squad played a part in the title win at one point or another: the spectacular two-goal salvo by young Mozambican wing-back Geny Catamo to beat Benfica 2-1, the outstanding display by forgotten centre-back Eduardo Quaresma after being drafted in against Porto, or the prolific strike-rate of veteran striker Paulinho despite usually starting on the bench.

Emphatic... Sporting broke several records en route to the title

Sporting fans face a nervous summer with an array of their best players likely to attract interest, although the architect of their newfound success seems to be staying. Amorim was strongly linked with Liverpool, Chelsea and West Ham United but, at the time of writing, it appears he will stay in the Portuguese capital for at least one more season. Having a crack at the new Champions League format with an ever-improving team is an appealing challenge, or so Sporting fans hope, but things change quickly in football and money could talk.

For a perfect example of fast-

THE BREAKDOWN

TEAM OF THE SEASON

CUP FINAL
Sporting missed out on the double after an eventful final against rivals **Porto**. Jeremiah St Juste headed the champions in front before being sent off as Evanilson equalised. In extra-time, Iranian striker Mehdi Taremi scored from the penalty spot in his final game for the club.

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS
Sporting and **Benfica** qualified directly for the Champions League group phase. **Porto** go into the group stage of the Europa League, while **Braga** will have to qualify to join them. **Vitoria de Guimaraes** will compete in the Conference League.

RELEGATED AND PROMOTED TEAMS
A first season in four decades with no island clubs was quickly rectified as **Santa Clara** (Azores) and **Nacional** (Madeira) were promoted. **AVS** beat **Portimonense** in the play-off to replace the Algarve club in the top flight, and northern teams **Vizela** and **Chaves** went down.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Sporting's record signing proved a snip as **Viktor Gyokeres** enjoyed a sensational debut campaign in Portugal, scoring 43 goals and providing 14 assists in 50 games, all the more remarkable when it emerged he had been carrying a knee injury all season.

> "This is the team that plays the best football since I've been here"
>
> Sporting coach Ruben Amorim

changing fortunes, one need only look to the red half of Lisbon. One year ago, Roger Schmidt was being lauded from the rooftops having guided Benfica to the title and endearing himself to the fans by saying: "If you love football, you love Benfica." Well, the love affair was fleeting. Benfica's fans were fiercely critical of the team's stodgy football, accusing Schmidt of failing to get the most out of a squad packed with top-quality players.

"For Benfica to win the league, we would have had to break our points total," retorted Schmidt, but although the Eagles kept pace with Sporting until the final month, it was more down to the individual brilliance of Angel Di Maria than a convincing game plan. In this tense background, president Rui Costa came out in defence of his coach, stating that the German will remain in charge – a risky move, with presidential elections on the horizon.

If Benfica's season was traumatic for their supporters, Porto's was no better and marked a huge turning point in the history of the club. In 1982, Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa became president and transformed what had previously been a provincial outfit into the dominant force at home and an authentic European heavyweight, winning an astonishing 23 league titles and seven international trophies, including twice becoming champions of Europe.

But Porto have struggled to maintain their position at the pinnacle of Portuguese football amid financial mismanagement. In April, Andre Villas-Boas obtained a crushing victory in the presidential elections, winning 80 per cent of the vote to oust Pinto da Costa. Coach Sergio Conceicao, who had lent his backing to the historical president, left at the end of season as Villas-Boas attempts to arrest the decline by implementing sweeping changes at the Estadio do Dragao.

Sporting's record signing...Viktor Gyokeres

COACH OF THE SEASON
Ruben Amorim bounced back from a disappointing fourth-placed finish in 2022-23 to guide Sporting to a second championship title in four years, crushing the opposition and breaking the club's record for points, wins and goals along the way.

Lisbon native... Ruben Amorim

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
"They'll have to forgive me, but **Morten Hjulmand** is a more complete player in his position than predecessors Joao Palhinha, Matheus Nunes and Manuel Ugarte," said Amorim. High praise, considering that trio were sold for over €125m combined.

Complete midfielder ...Morten Hjulmand

Glory for PSV, crisis for Ajax

PSV sweep to record-breaking title win, while Ajax endure their worst-ever season

PSV head coach Peter Bosz has many admirers, including the late Johan Cruyff, due to his attack-minded and attractive football. But for every fan, there is also a critic. Before this season, his style of play had never led to collecting silverware at the highest level. Not that he hadn't been given the opportunity; Bosz had been at the helm at Ajax (with whom he lost the 2017 Europa League final to Manchester United and Jose Mourinho, a coach in every sense his opposite), Borussia Dortmund and Lyon – not exactly clubs hopeless at gaining prizes.

But this campaign, the 60-year-old finally silenced the doubters after leading PSV to their 25th Eredivisie title – and he did so in style.

At the start, there was no indication that things would be any different for Bosz this time around. Defending champions Feyenoord – who managed to keep coach Arne Slot on board for another year despite serious interest from Tottenham Hotspur (and before his subsequent move to Liverpool) – were still the team to beat. After all, other than Orkun Kokcu joining Benfica, their successful title-winning team from the season before remained in place.

But PSV made some shrewd signings in Jerdy Schouten (Bologna), Noa Lang (Club Brugge), Sergino Dest (on loan from Barcelona), Malik Tillman (on loan from Bayern Munich), Hirving Lozano (Napoli) and Ricardo Pepi (Augsburg). Though they conceded the fewest goals in the league (21), it was their attacking firepower that overwhelmed opponents, notching 111 goals in 34 matches.

Under Bosz, PSV simply set new standards. They equalled their own record of 17 consecutive wins, which dated back to 1988 when the Eindhoven outfit won the treble (national title, national cup and European Cup); they lost only once all season, against NEC Nijmegen, but not until matchday 27 – a result ending a 42-match unbeaten sequence in the league – and also clinched their biggest-ever away win (an 8-0 victory at Heerenveen) one week before claiming the title, finishing seven points clear of Feyenoord.

It was an incredible performance, which all the more exposed Ajax's disastrous campaign, as the Amsterdam club suffered the worst season in their history. In a nutshell, director of football Sven Mislintat and head coach Maurice Steijn were fired as Ajax slipped to rock bottom. More humiliation followed in the national cup when they were eliminated by fourth-tier amateur club Hercules. Signings like Benjamin Tahirovic, Borna Sosa, Josip Sutalo, Georges Mikautadze and later Jordan Henderson either failed to deliver or suffered long-term injuries. Hooligans disturbed games and damaged their own stadium after a defeat to arch-rivals Feyenoord. Ajax then lost the return in Rotterdam by a 6-0 scoreline – their biggest-ever defeat in *De Klassieker*.

And the chaos didn't end there. Alex Kroes, the man who was brought in as the messiah to help solve the crisis, was suspended by the club after it emerged that he bought more than 17,000 publicly-traded shares in Ajax, a listed company, roughly one week before his appointment as CEO was made public. In the Amsterdam boardroom, notorious

Dominant...PSV only lost once all season

Humiliating...Ajax lost 6-0 to Feyenoord in April

THE BREAKDOWN

TEAM OF THE SEASON

Lars Unnerstall (Twente)
Sergino Dest (PSV)
David Hancko (Feyenoord)
Jerdy Schouten (PSV)
Lutsharel Geertruida (Feyenoord)
Tjaronn Chery (NEC)
Joey Veerman (PSV)
Mats Wieffer (Feyenoord)
Malik Tillman (PSV)
Luuk de Jong (PSV)
Vangelis Pavlidis (AZ)

CUP FINAL

Feyenoord won the Dutch Cup for the 14th time, defeating NEC Nijmegen 1-0 in a match that was interrupted twice because of fireworks and smoke. The Rotterdam club played all their cup matches, including the final, at home.

Cup final match-winner ...Igor Paixao scored Feyenoord's goal

EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS

PSV and **Feyenoord** enter the Champions League group phase, with **Twente** in the preliminaries. **AZ** will join the Europa League, with **Ajax** in the qualifiers. Ninth-placed **Go Ahead Eagles** will play in the Conference League preliminaries after surprisingly winning the play-offs.

RELEGATED AND PROMOTED TEAMS

Volendam and **Vitesse** went straight down, replaced by second-tier champions **Willem II** and runners-up **Groningen**. Eighth-place **NAC** won the play-offs spectacularly, beating **Excelsior** 7-6 on aggregate in the final (6-2 win, 4-1 loss), to claim the Rotterdam club's top-flight spot.

for its different power groups, Kroes was eventually re-instated but not before being demoted from general manager to technical director.

In light of all the chaos, it could be argued that finishing fifth and collecting a ticket for the Europa League preliminaries wasn't such a bad result after all – not that anybody in Amsterdam would agree. One thing is for certain: new coach Francesco Farioli, arriving from Nice, will face a monstrous task rebuilding the team.

But if you think that Ajax reached an all-time low, things can always get worse – just ask Vitesse. The Arnhem club were relegated, ending their 35-year spell in the top flight, following an 18-point deduction – a record sanction imposed by the Dutch FA (KNVB) – after they "failed to meet the requirements of the licensing regulations" and provided "incorrect information" to authorities.

"Although this is a dark day for everything and everyone who cares about Vitesse, this is the harsh reality," said interim general manager Edwin Reijntjes in a statement on the club's official website. "Such a punishment was inevitable."

PSV equalled their own record of 17 consecutive wins, lost only once all season and clinched their biggest-ever away win

Their finances, or lack of them, are an immediate threat to their existence. Things don't look good for the club that, thanks to their close ties with Chelsea in the Roman Abramovich days, once had the likes of Mason Mount, Dominic Solanke, Bertrand Traore and Armando Broja on their books.

A crowd-funding campaign has been launched among the fans, with former players Wilfried Bony, Lewis Baker and Matt Miazga among those to donate, but much more water is needed under the John Frost Bridge that transverses the river Rhine to help keep a rudderless Vitesse afloat.

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Once deemed not good enough for Cambuur's reserves, **Jerdy Schouten** took an unorthodox road playing for unfancied ADO Den Haag, Telstar, Excelsior and then Bologna. Regularly dropped into the defence to initiate PSV's attacks.

Netherlands international...Jerdy Schouten

COACH OF THE SEASON
After last year's promotion, **Alex Pastoor** led Almere City to a decent 13th place in their maiden appearance in the Eredivisie. Often seen as a wise guy and stubborn, he decided to quit after the season to recharge his batteries.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
After arriving at PSV on loan from Bayern Munich last summer, **Malik Tillman** scored nine goals and assisted ten from left wing, persuading the Dutch champions to sign him on a permanent deal until 2028 for a reported €12m.

Loan star ...Malik Tillman

TOM SAINTFIET

"The final goal is to reach the World Cup and write history"

The well-travelled Belgian coach speaks to *World Soccer* after taking charge of the Philippines – his 11th international coaching role

Why did you decide to take the job as head coach of the Philippines national team after your success with Gambia?
Many people saw it as a strange move going to the Philippines. I was in Gambia for five and a half years, improving our FIFA ranking by 56 positions and qualifying twice for AFCON, reaching the quarter-finals in 2021. I felt I needed a new challenge. Despite talking to big African countries like Ghana and Cameroon, the Philippines' new and ambitious board approached me professionally. They have potential and clear plans. My desire to prove myself and open doors in Asia made me take this step.

What is the current state of football in the Philippines?
The Philippines has a complex situation. The domestic league recently expanded from five to 15 teams, but the level is diverse. Many players aren't born in the Philippines but have Filipino heritage and play abroad. We've been working to find and convince these players to join the national team. It takes time due to passport issues, but we see potential. Our infrastructure is improving, with plans for a new national stadium surface. The local league includes both Filipino and foreign players, mainly from Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, and other countries.

You played four matches in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers and lost all of them...
I hate losing, but it was somewhat expected. We played strong teams in Iraq, Vietnam and Indonesia, who have historically been tough opponents for us. It's disappointing, but we're rebuilding the team, making it younger and more competitive. We need time to integrate new players and improve.

Despite the losses, there were moments where we were close to getting points, showing we're on the right track. We are building a completely new team, integrating younger players to prepare for the 2027 Asian Cup and beyond. We've been reaching out to players worldwide, from Europe, North America and beyond. It's a diverse mix, and we need time to build cohesion. We're planning training camps and friendlies to develop the team. I believe we're on the right track and will be competitive in upcoming tournaments.

What are the next steps and expectations for the team?
Our immediate goal is to qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia, that's the goal our federation asked of me. We're preparing for the [ASEAN] Mitsubishi Electric Cup in November, aiming to reach the semi-finals. Long-term, we aim to be competitive in Asia and eventually qualify for the World Cup in 2030. It's a step-by-step process, but I'm confident in our direction. Success in regional tournaments is crucial for building momentum and credibility.

How close are the Philippines to qualifying for major tournaments?
We're not at the World Cup level yet, but we're getting closer to qualifying for the Asian Cup. Our recent game against Vietnam [a 3-2 defeat in Hanoi], despite the loss, was highly praised. As our team develops and players get more familiar with each other, I'm confident we'll qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup. The World Cup is a longer-term goal, but success in the Asian Cup and regional tournaments will help attract more talented players to our cause. Consistent performance and building a strong team foundation are key steps toward achieving our World Cup ambitions.

Can you name a player or two to watch out for in the future?
There are several promising players, such as Michael Baldisimo from San Jose Earthquakes, and Dylan Demuynck, a former Belgium youth national team player. Zico Bailey, who has shown quality in the USL, is also notable. We're in talks with many players globally, and I believe they will strengthen our squad significantly.

You have coached in many countries. Was this a personal choice, and what is your ultimate goal as a football coach?
It wasn't on purpose to travel so much, but it has made me stronger. I learn every day, everywhere I work. I learn from cultures, I learn from other coaches, and I learn a lot from mistakes. This constant learning helps me develop as a coach.

I'm 51 years old and have been coaching for 27 years. Since 2008, I have been a national team coach in 11 countries and have coached 104 official FIFA games. Despite this experience, I always strive to develop further. I have the advantage of adapting very easily to different cultures and styles. I speak several languages fluently: English, French, German and Dutch, and have basic knowledge of Arabic and Spanish. This linguistic ability helps me immensely in my work, allowing me to communicate effectively with players from diverse backgrounds.

Countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Cameroon, Nigeria and Ghana have shown interest in my coaching style. My ultimate goal is to coach at the World Cup, not just to be there, but to achieve great results. I'm an international coach, just like many others, and I'm always striving to improve. The final goal is to reach the World Cup and write history. Being at the World Cup represents the pinnacle of a coach's career, and I am determined to make a significant impact there, showcasing the skills and potential of the team I lead.

Interview by Emanuele Giulianelli

AFC

PHILLIPS' GOLDEN YEAR

As Harry Kane wins the 2023-24 ESM Golden Shoe, Sean Cole looks back to the turn of the century to remember the last Englishman to win the award

Among the many distinguished names in football history to have claimed the European Golden Shoe since 1967-68, there are only two Englishmen. When Harry Kane became the latest winner of the award, it was no great surprise: England's all-time record goalscorer and a €100 million signing for one of Europe's super clubs notched 36 Bundesliga goals for Bayern Munich en route to the prize. When Sunderland's Kevin Phillips won the award after the 1999-2000 season, it was less expected.

"I had to come through the hard way," says Phillips, reflecting on his belated rise to prominence. "To be told at 18 that you're not good enough and then to go on and achieve all those goals you dream of as a young kid is always satisfying. To prove people wrong along the way is great. It was an immense season and something I'll remember for the rest of my days."

Football has many remarkable stories of triumph over adversity, but Phillips' transformation from non-league right-back to Europe's most prolific striker was astonishing in its scale and speed. After being released by Southampton, he played in defence for Baldock Town until he was briefly moved up front to cover for injuries. His prospects changed almost overnight and he never looked back.

Seizing an unexpected opportunity, Phillips soon turned professional with Watford. Two-and-a-half years later, he signed for Sunderland, who had just been relegated from the Premier League. A speculative gamble turned into a sure thing. He became a club legend, scoring 130 goals in 235 appearances.

While the responsibility of scoring goals can be made to feel like a burden, particularly at a club like Sunderland where fans are more desperate than most to see their team succeed, Phillips saw it as a pleasure and a privilege. He flourished where others wilted.

"Some people say great strikers are cold-blooded. They've got a steely look in their eye. Kevin did it with a big smile on his face," says Niall Quinn, Phillips' strike partner during this golden period. "He played as if it was the easiest thing in the world to score. It became infectious for him."

Powerful in the air and with an assured touch, Quinn was a towering presence and an experienced target man. Although Phillips didn't have the same physical stature or top-flight pedigree, he was a livewire around the box and a clinical finisher. When paired together, those differences helped them bring the best out of each other.

"Niall got a new lease of life with me coming in," explains Phillips. "We didn't do an awful lot on the training pitch. We just fed off each other. We'd try not to be more than ten or 15 yards apart. Quinny was always the focal point and I played off him, whether I was coming round the front for a lay-off or running in behind from a flick on. We just hit it off. At times, people couldn't cope with us."

In 1999, Sunderland returned to the Premier League. Despite dominating the First Division, they were still tipped for relegation. As their top scorer in each of the previous two seasons, Phillips was crucial to the Black Cats' survival hopes, but many questioned whether he was up to the challenge.

Rodney Marsh, a former England international now working as a pundit, suggested that Phillips would struggle to score five goals; that comment stung and helped fuel his success. "I was desperate to prove him wrong. That really spurred me on," Phillips admits.

Still, even he must have felt like the doubters might have a point after being humbled by Chelsea on the opening day. He barely got a kick as Sunderland were thoroughly outclassed at Stamford Bridge. Once the supporters had left, Peter Reid took his team back out to the centre circle and unleashed hell in front of an empty stadium.

"It was tough love and a big wake-up call. Instead of going on the coach, you're dragged into the middle of the pitch to sit around and get a lecture like that," recalls Quinn. "We looked like we were going to be cannon fodder because, quite frankly, 4-0 was kind to us. We had a lot of soul-searching to do."

Reid's uncompromising intervention worked and the players responded. Three days later, Sunderland beat Watford 2-0, with Phillips scoring a brace against his former club. After blasting home a penalty, his second goal showed real quality. Bringing the ball down on his chest, he dropped a shoulder to make space and curled a shot into the top ▶

VADY

corner from 30 yards.

Just two games in, Phillips already felt like he belonged at this level. "That hunger and desire was there. It's a massive relief for any striker when you get your first goal, so to get two... I was off and running," he says. "I was lucky enough to be in a side that was creating chances for me and it just felt right. I didn't have to adjust my game an awful lot."

Once Phillips started scoring, he couldn't stop. He'd reached five goals by the end of August, dismissing Marsh's concerns with laughable ease. On a rain-soaked night at St James' Park, his perfectly measured chip secured a famous win over rivals Newcastle United.

That result ignited Sunderland's season, sparking a run of ten wins from 14 games that propelled them up to third by Christmas. Teams couldn't match their energy and intensity. They played forward quickly, forcing their opponents onto the back foot. Momentum and pressure would build, with Quinn and Phillips ready to pounce.

"I think we caught a few teams off guard with our style of play. We were very direct because of the partnership Niall and me struck up. We had two good wingers who liked to get wide, two attacking full-backs and some aggression in the midfield area, so we had a good balance. Having two strikers in the team, getting balls into the box was the gameplan. Then it's all about the movement."

Team spirit and togetherness were key ingredients. The players cared for each other and were brimming with confidence. Phillips felt untouchable. In September, he grabbed a hat-trick against Derby County with three unerring close-range finishes. His team-mates are credited for supplying the ammunition.

"I was lucky enough to play with David Beckham in the England squad. For me, Nicky Summerbee was right up there in terms of his delivery from crosses. Having him out on the right-hand side was like a dream come true for me and Niall. We had Michael Gray bombing on from left-back. Stefan Schwarz would cut inside and slip him in. It's about the quality into the box from wide areas and we certainly had that."

At the start of December, Sunderland took revenge on Chelsea in front of a raucous home crowd. Quinn and Phillips led the charge, scoring twice each in an emphatic 4-1 victory. Phillips' first, a viciously-struck volley that dipped and swerved away from Ed de Goey, was the pick of the bunch.

"We'd found our way by then and we

Off the mark...Phillips celebrates scoring his first Premier League goal

Deadly finisher... "King Kev" volleys home against Chelsea

were starting to get respect," says Quinn. "We rattled them. It was one of the best atmospheres of any game I've ever been at in my life. The noise was so loud. The punters were giving it everything and we were responding."

That performance proved just how far Sunderland had come in the space of a few months. The callow newcomers had matured into a strong and fiercely competitive side. Marcel Desailly, a World Cup-winning centre-back with France 18 months earlier and renowned for his composure, was hauled off at half-time after being run ragged by Quinn and Phillips. The Black Cats ended the day ten points clear of their opponents.

Top spot was in sight, until Sunderland's form collapsed in the second half of the campaign. Although Phillips kept scoring, including a brace against Newcastle, they went 11 games without a win and slipped to seventh, agonisingly just short of European qualification.

Still, this did nothing to dampen Sunderland supporters' excitement. Both the club and the city were enjoying a long-awaited resurgence. A new state-of-the-art ground was packed to cheer on a team that played with verve and passion, only losing three home games that season.

"The atmosphere at the Stadium of Light was unique," says Phillips. "It started in the tunnel before the game, with the music that we played. The roar walking out onto the pitch. You could see the fear in the opposition's eyes. It was a hostile place. A real fortress."

Nobody had scored 30 goals in a Premier League season since Alan Shearer four years previously. The Newcastle and England captain had claimed that he didn't think anyone else would reach that target because the standard of defences had improved so much, giving Phillips even more motivation. He acknowledges that this was another success born, at least in part, of defiance.

After snatching at a few chances, a pep talk from Reid helped Phillips regain his composure and the milestone goal arrived at home to West Ham United in the penultimate game. Phillips fed the ball out wide to Summerbee and darted into the box to convert a pinpoint cross. In celebration, he flashed the fingers and thumbs of both his hands three times, signalling that the magical 30 had been reached.

Phillips didn't realise it at the time, but he would be crowned the top scorer in the whole of Europe, not just the Premier League. A complete novice at the highest level before that season, he suddenly had the era's finest strikers – Andriy Shevchenko, Hernan Crespo, Raul and Gabriel Batistuta – trailing in his wake. Racing Santander's Salva Ballesta was closest to keeping pace with 27 goals.

> "When I got the call, I thought someone was winding me up. I didn't know that such a thing existed"
>
> **Kevin Phillips on winning the European Golden Shoe**

"It's incredible. Little old me from Stevenage, sitting alongside some of the greats," he says. "No one can ever take that away from me. I certainly never set out to become a European Golden Shoe winner. When I got the call, I thought someone was winding me up. I didn't know that such a thing existed.

"Once it had sunk in, I got the invite to go for a dinner to accept the award. We had a match at the Stadium of Light that night, so they brought the boot and presented it to me on the pitch. That was even more special because it was in front of our fans. It was a great feeling."

Although Phillips was courted by several giant clubs that summer, he chose to stay with Sunderland. Goals continued to flow throughout his career, but never quite like that fairy-tale season where anything seemed possible. The unique circumstances surrounding his achievement made it all the more extraordinary.

"The amazing thing was he wasn't pushing his agent to get away to Manchester United or Arsenal. He gave his all to the club," says Quinn. "People look back and say: 'He could have won a load if he'd brought that to a top club', but he was comfortable at Sunderland. He was a hero there.

"Harry Kane is phenomenal and I'm sure Kevin won't be the slightest bit jealous at rubbing shoulders with him as the second Englishman to bring that prize home. I think it just sums up how good Kevin was that he did it for a team that finished seventh in the Premier League."

Black Cats team-mates ...Nicky Summerbee and Niall Quinn

PARIS '24

This summer's Olympic Games marks the 100th anniversary of Uruguay's football victory at the 1924 Olympics, a tournament where the beginning of the sport's globalisation can be traced

Words: Tim Vickery

There was great regret in Uruguay earlier this year when the nation's Under-23 side failed to qualify for the Paris Olympics. It meant that Marcelo Bielsa's men had missed out on the chance to celebrate a centenary of huge significance – the Paris Olympics of 1924, when little Uruguay arrived unknown and unheralded and swept their way to the gold medal.

It is a key moment in the history of this little country, established in the 19th century as a buffer state between Brazil and Argentina. As Ondino Viera, coach in the 1966 World Cup, put it: "Other nations have their history. Uruguay has its football."

But even in Uruguay's absence, the celebration of the centenary of 1924 should go ahead in Paris. That year's Olympic tournament is important to everyone; Uruguay's gold medal is effectively the birth of the modern globalised game. It is when football showed its potential as the world's number one spectator sport, and the moment when a World Cup became inevitable.

Initially the Olympic football tournament was contested by club sides. After it was taken over by national teams in 1908, Egypt in 1920 became the first participant from outside Europe. The North Africans were back again in 1924, along with the United States, but it was Uruguay who went off with the glory and captured the public imagination.

Just over 3,000 spectators watched their opening game, an extraordinary 7-0 destruction of Yugoslavia. And then the crowds started to swell, curious to see the exotic South Americans as they beat United States 3-0, cruised 5-1 past hosts France and overcame the Netherlands 2-1 in the semi-final. For the decider against Switzerland, thousands were locked out of the Colombes stadium, unable to watch Uruguay put on another show and

One hundred years on... Paris will once again host the Summer Olympics

win gold with a 3-0 triumph. With 20 goals scored and just two conceded, the victory could hardly have been more conclusive. But mere numbers could not do justice to Uruguay's achievements. This was not just a case of what they had done – it was how they had done it.

The French public were astonished. Writer and sports enthusiast Henry de Montherlant wrote: "Here we have real football! Compared to this, what we knew before, what we played, was no more than a schoolboy's hobby."

Gabriel Hanot was one of the game's key movers and shakers, and would go on to be the brains behind the launch of the professional French league and the European Cup. A former international himself, by 1924 a journalist, he had never seen anything to compare with the Uruguayan team. He praised their "marvellous virtuosity in receiving the ball, controlling it and using it," their "impeccable technique," the way they had "pushed towards perfection the art of the feint and swerve and the dodge, but they know how to play quickly and directly" and concluded that "they created a beautiful football, elegant but at the same time varied, rapid, powerful and effective."

The acknowledged masters of the game at this point were the English, who, as professionals, were not eligible for the Olympics. But Hanot was more impressed by the Uruguayans: "These fine athletes," he wrote, "who are to the English professionals like Arab thoroughbreds next to farm horses."

The conclusion was obvious, both from the football played on the field and from the number of spectators watching from the stands: there had to be a competition open to all, amateur and professional alike, to find out who really was best. This call was reinforced four years later, when Uruguay won another gold in Amsterdam – the football medals in 1924 and 1928 are the only gold ones the country has ever won. And so the first World Cup – without the presence of the English, who stayed away – was duly played in 1930, staged and won by Uruguay.

History often carries with it a sense of inevitability, and so it is well worth considering matters from the perspective of 1924. Before the tournament, Uruguay were little more than exotic, unknown outsiders. Perhaps the Europeans should have been better informed. The Copa America had started in 1916, and had already been disputed seven times, four of them won by Uruguay. But in the days before air travel, the world was a much bigger place. And anyway, from

Gold medal match...Uruguay v Switzerland in the Olympic final

> "Here we have real football! Compared to this, what we knew before, what we played, was no more than a schoolboy's hobby"
>
> Writer Henry de Montherlant on Uruguay's 1924 performances

Gold medallists... Uruguay's victorious Olympians of 1924

the perspective of, say, the mid-1890s, there was nothing inevitable about the prominence of Uruguayan football just a few years later. So how did it happen?

The answer lies in the dynamics of the British Empire, in patterns of immigration and in social policy.

South America, and especially its southern cone, was an informal part of the Empire, and the British brought football along with their navy and their ownership of utility companies, especially the railways. In the early years, teams from visiting warships were the most glamorous opponents for local sides. And Penarol, one of the country's traditional big two teams, began life as the Central Uruguayan Railway Cricket Club.

It was the British, then, who introduced football to Uruguay, and there was always an influence of the Scottish passing style in the local game. But the interesting aspect, of course, is what the locals did with the game – and the most important point is that they seized on it with rapid enthusiasm.

Immigrants were pouring in, especially from Italy and Spain. In the early years of the 20th century, more than a third of the population of Montevideo, the commandeering capital city, was foreign born. This was a new, young country. More than 70 per cent of the population were under 30 – an astonishing statistic, particularly given the slightly musty sense of melancholy that the country can give off these days, when so many of its young move abroad. Back then it was shiny and thrusting – with advances in refrigeration making it much easier for the country to enrich itself by selling beef abroad. Visitors were struck by the youth and ambition of Uruguay's leaders. This was a country ready and hungry for new things – and one of them was football.

And the secret of Uruguay's success was that it was drawing on the resources of its entire male population earlier than its much bigger neighbours. The same sequence of events was seen elsewhere in South America – football was brought in by the British, taken up by the local elites and moved downwards through society. But this happened much more quickly in Uruguay, and not by chance.

If the country was going to be so small, then it had to be smarter. From the late 19th century, Uruguay saw itself as a model nation, with an excellent public education system. It was a literary society before its neighbours, with a popular press helping to spread the development of football. It set up a prototype welfare state, with an eight-hour day, giving its citizens time for leisure activities.

This is the backdrop to those great early Uruguay teams. They were legitimate representatives of the country's working class. They had taken football, with its First World prestige, and reinterpreted it as a more balletic sport full of twists and turns and joyful improvisations. The team that won the first Copa America in 1916 in Argentina – while Europe was tearing itself apart on the Somme – included two black players: rapid striker Isabelino Gradin and cerebral midfielder Juan Delgado. In Paris eight years later, there was talented midfielder Jose Leandro Andrade, the first black player that most Europeans had seen.

Andrade was one of a group from that young team in Paris who were still around to win the inaugural World Cup six years later. There was captain and centre-half Jose Nasazzi, with the imposing air of a dockside shop steward. And the stars – one of Italian origin and the other born in Spain – were Hector Scarone and Pedro Cea, inside-forwards who traded passes at electrifying pace and giddying angles. Both weighed in with goals during the Paris '24 campaign – with five and four respectively – while centre-forward Pedro Petrone used his rocket shot to score seven. All of these players sailed to Paris as young men in 1924 and six years later were in at the birth of the greatest show on earth.

A century on from Colombes 1924, the latest generation of Uruguayans will not be present in Paris. But such is the importance of that side that all those on parade in the Olympic football tournament this summer are the descendants of, and owe a debt to, the great team that wore the sky blue shirt a hundred years ago.

Going for gold... one of the gold medals won by Uruguay

World Cup heroes...Lorenzo Fernandez, Pedro Cea and Hector Scarone in 1930

No big names, no big crowds

Lack of star power and difficulty in selling tickets leads to further questions over football's Olympics future ahead of Paris 2024

There will be no Endrick, the global game's newest breakout star, and no third-consecutive gold medal for Brazil at the Olympic Games in Paris after the defending champions failed to qualify. From the penalty spot, Neymar sent Brazilian fans at the Maracana at the 2016 Olympic Games into a delirium, as the "*futebol* nation" at long last claimed the elusive Olympic title. Five years later, Brazil defended their crown. Yet, behind closed doors in Tokyo because of the global health crisis, football was once again relegated to an afterthought in the Olympics cosmos.

Not everyone shared that sentiment though. On the back of playing the Copa America that summer, Richarlison flew to Japan and in draining conditions steered Brazil to the final as the South Americans were taken to extra-time by Spain. The then-Everton forward was stretching the limits of his physical endurance.

Richarlison's quest goes to the heart of the conundrum of the Olympic tournament: how is the competition perceived and, crudely stated, what is the value of an Olympic medal? Outside of Europe's limited endearment for the tournament, the majority of participants believe the competition carries significant weight. That sentiment is a reflection of the balance of power in the global game. And so, without Brazil and their potent yellow shirt and the imagery, a new champion – with the men's final scheduled ahead of the women's final for the first time – will be crowned on August 9 at the Parc des Princes, the main venue of the tournament along with six other cities, with the Stade de France hosting the athletics.

Much depends on the squad lists the participant managers call up. The Olympic football tournament is not a part of the international calendar and therefore FIFA does not require clubs to release players for the tournaments. That has always been problematic – as well as the rule that the competition is an Under-23 event with three players above the age of 23 permitted in every squad. The result is makeshift teams that, at least from a European viewpoint, have not attached too much importance to the competition.

But, like Brazil in 2016 where the fans and media at times succeeded in drowning out all the other sports, some teams will prioritise the finals.

France coach Thierry Henry omitted Kylian Mbappe from his squad, despite the Parisian claiming that he "wanted to play" in the event on home soil. Realistically though, his captaining of the senior team at Euro 2024

Gold medallist ...Argentina coach Javier Mascherano at the 2004 Games

Olympics berth sealed...Argentina qualified for Paris 2024 behind South American Under-23 champions Paraguay back in February

Group guide

A

France, USA, Guinea, New Zealand

France want to relive the golden summer of 1984 when they claimed gold in Los Angeles. The hosts qualified automatically and kick-off their tournament against USA at Marseille's Velodrome before playing New Zealand, Oceania's representatives, and Guinea, the last team to qualify for Paris. The West African nation beat Indonesia 1-0 in May to complete the Olympic line-up and will feature in the tournament for only the second time, having participated in the 1968 Games. The Kiwis have too little opposition in their region and won the qualifying tournament by hammering Fiji 9-0 in the final. It will, however, be hard to repeat their sixth-place finish from Tokyo.

B

Argentina, Morocco, Iraq, Ukraine

Argentina's opener v AFCON U23 champions Morocco will serve as a good benchmark to assess the seriousness of the South Americans' quest for gold, two decades after they claimed victory in Athens. Javier Mascherano returns to the stage, but this time as manager, and he can count on an impressive talent pool with Claudio Echeverri, Ezequiel Fernandez and others. Iraq, with star man Ali Jasim, claimed bronze at the recent Under-23 Asian Cup, while war-torn Ukraine keep defying the circumstances at both senior and youth levels, reaching the semi-finals of the Under-23 Euros to book their spot with Shakhtar Donetsk's Heorhiy Sudakov among the tournament's top scorers.

and his arrival at Real Madrid was always going to complicate matters.

Instead, France's overage slots went to strikers Alexandre Lacazette of Lyon and Crystal Palace's in-form Jean-Philippe Mateta, as Henry opted against picking a third over-23 player in favour of youngsters that he has worked with in his role as Under-21s coach. Mateta's Palace team-mate Michael Olise also made the cut but, highlighting the difficult in picking an Olympics party, PSG's Bradley Barcola and Warren Zaire-Emery – originally the only players to be selected for both the Olympics and Euro 2024 – were later withdrawn along with four other players.

With such strength in depth, the hosts will expect to top their group, and thereby avoid Argentina in the quarter-finals. The South Americans are bidding to rekindle their fortunes of Athens 2004 when they beat Paraguay to claim gold under Marcelo Bielsa. That side included Javier Mascherano, who now leads the team as coach.

Like Richarlison in 2021, Mascherano had already featured in a Copa America finals that summer before going on to claim Olympic gold. Four years later, he won gold again in Beijing alongside Lionel Messi, but he will be without his old team-mate this time in Paris.

"It would be two, three straight months of not being with the club, and more than anything I'm not at an age to be in everything," the Inter Miami forward told *ESPN Argentina*. "I have to choose carefully, and it would be too much to play two straight tournaments."

Instead, creative responsibilities will likely fall to another MLS player, Atlanta United's Thiago Almada, who wore the No.10 shirt when shining in the qualifying tournament at the start of the year.

Few things would have granted the Olympic football tournament legitimacy or attention quite like the presence of Messi, the defining player of the last era of football, or Mbappe, the defining player of the current one. Their absence is a blow – albeit not a surprising one – to the competition's organisers who, according to a report in French newspaper *Le Monde* in May, still have around a million seats to sell.

Which other country, then, could provide the star factor that the tournament needs? Spain, of course, also have Euro 2024 commitments to focus on, and may be scarred from 2021 when exciting young midfielder Pedri went to Tokyo after starring at Euro 2020 and has arguably yet to recover. Liverpool may be set for a dispute with Egypt coach Rogerio Micale, who wants to select the talismanic Mohamed Salah despite the forward's apparent struggles since January's Africa Cup of Nations. The United States' focus will inevitably be on their hosting of the Copa America, while Japan confirmed that thrilling forward Take Kubo will also miss the tournament to focus on pre-season with Real Sociedad. In other words, this will be a tournament for emerging talents rather than genuine A-listers.

Ultimately, the suffocating three-week festival of swimming, judo, athletics and the rest leaves little time for football. Perhaps it should be no different; perhaps men's football – ever since 1928 when the Olympic tournament still served as a World Cup – is no longer relevant. It's a theme that resurfaces every four years and then fades again as quickly as it came. That, however, will be of little concern to the team that wins the gold medal.

Samindra Kunti

3 TO WATCH

MARKO STAMENIC
(New Zealand)
Tidy and strong midfielder set for a big summer move from Red Star Belgrade. The first Kiwi to score in the UEFA Champions League since 1994.

IBRAHIM ADEL
(Egypt)
Promising right-footed left-winger. Made three sub appearances in Tokyo, but has endured a difficult season with injuries.

PAU CUBARSI
(Spain)
Cut from Spain's Euro 2024 squad as *La Roja* look to avoid a repeat of overplaying another starlet with the world at their feet.

Absent...Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi

C **Uzbekistan, Spain, Egypt, Dominican Rep**
Spain will be favourites to top a winnable group and compete for medals as the tournament progresses. In Tokyo, Pedri, Dani Olmo, Mikel Oyarzabal, Marco Asensio and Bryan Gil all formed part of the squad and much will depend on which overage players Spain can take to Paris. The Uzbeks are Asia's second-strongest team with a nucleus of skilled players, including Lens defender Abdukodir Khusanov. Egypt count on coach Rogerio Micale, who guided Brazil to Olympic gold in 2016 and spent time in Saudi Arabia with Al Hilal, but his side's preparations have not always been smooth sailing. The Dominican Republic upset Jamaica and Guatemala to clinch their ticket to Paris.

D **Japan, Paraguay, Mali, Israel**
Asian champions Japan will be narrow favourites in the most open group. In 2021, the hosts had a formidable team with Wataru Endo, Take Kubo, Maya Yoshida and Takehiro Tomiyasu, but fell short of a medal. Mali return for the first time since 2004 when they reached the quarter-finals. At the U23 AFCON last year, right-back Fode Doucoure, centre-back Ibrahima Cisse and midfielder Mamadou Sangare were among their most impressive stars. Paraguay are the other South American representatives and could be dark horses after pipping Argentina – Diego Gomez is certainly one to watch. Completing the quartet, Israel, under ex-Standard Liege and Charlton boss Guy Luzon, apply a defensive style.

Going for Gold in Paris

There are plenty of candidates vying for the Olympic gold medal in the women's football tournament this summer

Only one host nation has ever won gold in women's Olympic soccer – the United States, unsurprisingly, in Atlanta 1996, the first time the event was included at the Games. In the six since, five of which were held in countries who could be considered contenders, only Brazil in 2016 even reached the semi-finals.

This is half of the historic trend France are seeking to buck at Paris 2024; the other half is their own reputation for choking.

France have produced a series of outstanding players, many of whom featured in the Lyon team that until Barcelona's recent emergence dominated women's football. Yet prior to this year's UEFA Nations League, *Les Bleues* had never appeared in a major final.

They lost that match to Spain and, given its novelty, the Nations League is yet to be regarded as a notable prize anyway. But it was progress nevertheless. Previously, France had reached a solitary semi-final in each of the World Cup (2011), Olympics (2012) and European Championship (2022).

This time – they are trying to convince themselves – it will be different. In hiring Herve Renard, the French Football Federation, now under more enlightened administration, made a statement choice. The World Cup, in which they went out in the quarter-finals to hosts Australia following a nerve-shredding, lengthy penalty shootout, came early for him, but he has now had 15 months at the helm.

Until a home defeat in Saint-Etienne in early June to England, they were on an impressive run of form this year, having won away to the Lionesses and Sweden and also beaten Germany, all in competitive matches.

Perhaps that defeat was a wake-up call, or perhaps it will simply add to the anxiety that a host nation with a record of bottling it in the big games is bound to feel. A good start in the opening game in Lyon against Colombia is crucial. However, it is a group they ought to qualify from.

World champions ...Spain will be favourites in Paris

While Renard has had time to settle, Emma Hayes is being pitched into the Games within weeks of taking the reins of the United States. That's not strictly true – she was appointed in November and has been influencing team selection and tactics under assistant Twila Kilgore. But it was not until she had finished leading Chelsea to their fifth successive Women's Super

Group guide

A

France, Colombia, Canada, New Zealand

Group A includes the hosts and holders, and both are expected to make it into the knockouts. Despite the recent defeat to England, France have been in good form while Canada, after a poor World Cup, are unbeaten since October. Colombia were one of the World Cup's breakout successes and with Chelsea's Mayra Ramirez and Real Madrid's Linda Caicedo in their ranks will fancy their chances of avenging New Zealand's 1-0 win when the teams met in the 2016 Games. That is one of only two Olympic wins for New Zealand. But while their playing resources are modest, the Football Ferns performed creditably in a brace of matches in Bogota in December (0-0, 0-1), so *Las Cafeteras* will be wary.

Spot secured... Australia players celebrate qualifying

USWNT coach...Emma Hayes will go to her first tournament as United States boss

League title that she could officially get on the grass with the players.

From afar, Hayes has overhauled a squad that to an extent had been allowed to grow old together. Her first XI, for a 4-0 win over South Korea in Colorado in June, did not have a single player who started the 2019 World Cup final triumph. Mallory Swanson, who missed the 2023 World Cup debacle, when the US went out in the last 16, scored twice – her first goals since returning from a serious knee injury.

Hayes rotated nine starting players for her second game, a 3-0 win over the same opponents in Minnesota three days later. That is more starters in those two games than the 18 places available for the Olympic squad, rather underlining her need to evaluate players fast. Debuts were also awarded, including to 16-year-old Ajax wonderkid Lily Yohannes (now just turned 17), who scored ten minutes into her bow.

The US have a favourable draw but a tricky group. If the tournament goes as the seedings suggest, they will avoid both France and Spain until the final, but making such assumptions is a risky business. First, they must negotiate a group featuring an Australian team which is resilient but will miss star striker and captain Sam Kerr, a Zambian team good going forward but less sound defensively, and Germany.

The latter, normally so reliable, are an unpredictable factor. Finalists in Euro 2022, they tanked at the World Cup a year later, going out in the group stage. However, under 73-year-old interim coach Horst Hrubesch, who will hand the reins to men's Under-17 World Cup-winning coach Christian Wuck after the Games, they have looked much happier.

They are perhaps fortunate to be at the Olympics. UEFA previously entered their best World Cup finishers, but this time changed the system to reward success in the new Nations League, meaning World Cup finalists England/Team GB missed out and Germany made it. But having qualified, they could do well.

The team to beat, however, are clearly Spain – only Italy have done so since *La Roja's* World Cup triumph. That shock 3-2 defeat in Pontevedra in December snapped a run of eight successive wins, including the World Cup final. Spain's response was to go and beat three top-ten teams – Sweden, Netherlands and France – in the next three games. The last of those was the Nations League final, a new bauble to add to their World Cup star.

Who qualifies with Spain is wide open. In the four Olympics since the tournament was enlarged to 12 teams, four points has always been enough to qualify as one of the two best third-placed teams, but three points has only done so once. In other words, one win is not enough so it will be interesting to see whether teams look to bank an early draw, or go for wins.

France coach...Herve Renard will be aiming to guide the hosts to their first-ever major trophy

As usual, the matches kick-off before the official opening ceremony with all 12 teams playing on July 25 beginning at 5pm local time. Marseille, Bordeaux, Lyon, Nice, Nantes and Saint-Etienne all host matches with the final at the Parc de Princes, Paris, on August 10. The gold medallists are likely to be American or European, but individual matches are harder to call.

The finalists will play six matches in 17 days at the end of a long club season for most European-based players. With only 18 in the squads, it will be a test of versatility, stamina and the medical staff, as well as talent. Unlike the men's tournament, there are no age restrictions, a good chance of plenty of elite players being involved, and a highly valued prized to play for.

Glenn Moore

3 TO WATCH

SJOEKE NUSKEN
(Germany)
In a tournament in which versatility is prized, Chelsea's 23-year-old could be a key player.

RACHEAL KUNDANANJI
(Zambia)
Left Africa at 18 to play in Kazakhstan. Now the world's most expensive female footballer signed for €735,000 by Bay FC from Madrid CFF.

CATARINA MACARIO
(USA)
Won bronze in Tokyo but only played six minutes, and missed the 2023 WC injured. Under Emma Hayes, who signed her for Chelsea, it may be Macario's time.

B

USA, Zambia, Germany, Australia
The strongest group, which could lead to only two qualifying as teams take points off each other. Emma Hayes has had little preparation time with her new American charges, but the four-time winners should progress. 2016 gold-medallists Germany are looking in much better shape than when Down Under last year. Nicely balanced, they have plenty of experience but also some young talent. The other teams are a tale of strikers absent and present. Australia will miss Sam Kerr while Zambia, though defensively frail, have three forwards signed by NWSL clubs for significant fees this year: Racheal Kundananji (Bay FC), Barbra Banda and Grace Chanda (both Orlando Pride).

C

Spain, Japan, Nigeria, Brazil
Extraordinarily, the world champions are the only debutants in the tournament, illustrating how meteoric Spain's recent dominance has been. Qualifying as Nations League winners, they will start as favourites. Japan buckled under the pressure of hosting in the last Olympics, but a more mature side may play with greater freedom this time. The *Nadeshiko* also thrashed Spain 4-0 at the World Cup. Two-time silver-medallists Brazil, reviving after a bad World Cup, will be buoyed by reaching the CONCACAF W Gold Cup final, losing unluckily 1-0 to the US. Nigeria return after a 16-year absence. A strong World Cup, in which they beat Australia, shows they should not be underrated.

Glenn Moore

Barcelona retain European crown

Catalan giants lift the UEFA Champions League for second consecutive year

There was never really much doubt but, in front of 50,827 mostly *Blaugrana* fans in Bilbao, Barcelona's women confirmed that this is their era.

The 2-0 Champions League final triumph over Lyon was Barca's third in four years and, significantly, their first against Lyon in three finals. The baton has passed over the Pyrenees.

Aitana Bonmati and Alexia Putellas, the two most garlanded of their players, scored the goals but for once neither dominated. Instead, the key performers were winger Caroline Graham Hansen – especially in the first half – Patri Guijarro and, as Lyon threw crosses into the box late on, Lucy Bronze. Which goes a long way to explaining the success of this team: there are so many match-winners, so many players who can be relied upon to turn up on the big occasion.

After an opening hour in which Barcelona controlled the match without much threatening a goal, the deadlock was broken via a fortuitous deflection. Guijarro and Mariona Caldentey released Bonmati on a familiar inside-forward run into the box and her cross-shot diverted off the leg of Vanessa Gilles and past Christiane Endler.

The goal woke up the previously passive French champions and they pushed bodies forward, but failed to create a chance better than the clear header Gilles had spurned shortly before the opening goal.

Instead, it was Barca who struck, late substitute Putellas converting a cutback from Claudia Pina to the joy of her team-mates, a sweet finish to a wretched couple of years with injury.

"We didn't have our best game, but we'll come back," said Lyon's Bilbao native Damaris Egurrola.

There is no reason to think they will not. Their age profile is similar to Barca, if older in the crucial midfield area, but it is not yet clear how changes in the ownership will work out and there will be a new face in the dugout too.

After the match, Lyon head coach Sonia Bompastor said: "We are going to digest this disappointment and see what we have to work on in order to come back with the ambition of winning this Champions League," but she herself is bound for Chelsea as Emma Hayes' successor.

> "I'm such an ambitious person. I'm almost never satisfied with my work. I always want more"
>
> Barcelona goalscorer Aitana Bonmati

Spaniard Pedro Martinez Losa had been mooted as her replacement but, under contract to Scotland until 2027, the 48-year-old quickly ruled himself out. Instead, ex-Arsenal and Juventus boss Joe Montemurro was appointed. After winning titles in England and Italy, the Australian arrives with a strong CV.

European champions ...Alexia Putellas lifts the trophy for Barca

Barca will also have a new coach, with Jonatan Giraldez exiting for NWSL outfit Washington Spirit (whose owner Michelle Kang is coincidentally in the process of buying a controlling stake in Lyon).

"People thought the team's performances might dip [after the announcement]," he said. "We showed that wasn't the case today."

Whoever takes over will inherit a winning machine that has tied up most of its players on contracts – with the exception of Keira Walsh, who has been linked with a WSL return – and remains hungry for more silverware. As Bonmati said, when asked if she would ever be sated: "Anyone who knows me will say to you, 'She'll never have enough'. I'm such an ambitious person. I'm almost never satisfied with my work. I always want more."

Nevertheless, with both teams plus semi-finalists Chelsea changing coaches, next season offers a degree of unpredictability at the sharp end that the competition needs. Between them, Lyon and Barcelona have won the last nine titles, and only three other teams – Chelsea, Wolfsburg and Paris Saint-Germain – have reached the final.

This year, Chelsea lost a tight semi-final to Barcelona: after winning 1-0 in Catalonia they went down 2-0 at home, in a match to an extent decided by contentious refereeing decisions. PSG lost the other semi to Lyon, beaten by a goal in both legs (3-2 away, 2-1 at home).

While Chelsea adjust to Bompastor, PSG, who have endured much internal strife and coaching churn in recent years, may have some stability under Jocelyn Precheur, who will be their longest-serving coach since 2021 if he gets to Christmas.

Opening goal... Aitana Bonmati scores Barca's first goal with a deflected shot

Another contender, Wolfsburg, are also facing change, as next season will be the final one with Tommy Stroot as coach. The 35-year-old has rejected a contract extension but all parties appear happy for him to see out his final season.

Who else might threaten? Like the Lady Wolves, Bayern Munich and Arsenal were knocked out early this year – there was unpredictability in the competition's initial stages – but should be in the frame even if the latter have unexpectedly released Vivianne Miedema.

Arsenal will again be in first-round qualifying, as will Paris FC, Eintracht Frankfurt, Fiorentina and two of this season's unexpected quarter-finalists, Ajax and Benfica. Wolfsburg, PSG, Manchester City, Real Madrid, Roma and Juventus come in at the second round, as do quarter-finalists Hacken. The other surprise last-eight team, Norway's Brann, have not qualified.

Barcelona, Lyon, Bayern and Chelsea are the only direct entrants to the group stage for what will be the final Champions League season under the current format, before the women follow the men in adopting a version of the Swiss-system in an expanded 18-team league phase.

Captain's contribution... Alexia Putellas adds the second

Round-up

Lukewarm response to Women's Club World Cup

FIFA Congress...Gianni Infantino announced the Women's Club World Cup in Bangkok in May

It remains to be seen whether Barcelona's Champions League victory has also earned them a place in FIFA's inaugural Women's Club World Cup, which was announced at the Bangkok congress, as planned for early 2026.

No further details have been forthcoming, but there is already disquiet among both players and leagues in the sport's more established areas. The Women's League Forum rejected FIFA's claim to have consulted "thoroughly with all stakeholders" over the new match calendar into which the new club event is being shoehorned. Players' union FIFPro, though consulted, said key recommendations for mandatory rest periods were not incorporated.

The January/February scheduling is far from ideal for the European competitions, which will have just re-emerged from a winter break, nor the North American and Nordic ones who will be in the off-season – although with the game's dual calendars, finding a good time to play is always difficult.

For some, the answer to that conundrum is simple: "Never". As ever, it is the elite clubs and players whose workload will grow, encouraging the former to stockpile more of the latter at the expense of smaller clubs, and increasing their relative wealth.

For clubs and players outside Europe and North America, however, as with the men's equivalent, the competition will offer opportunities to grow. It should attract sponsors and media interest and, for players, playing experience and transfer possibilities.

To make room, one of the six international windows has been removed (September), but others were extended so there will not be fewer international matches. FIFPro's request for mandatory rest periods of 28 days in the off-season and a 14-day mid-season break were ignored.

The Women's League Forum, who claim they unsuccessfully asked for a meeting with FIFA on numerous occasions, are unhappy with the increase in weekends set aside for internationals, which they argue will add to player workloads and limits "leagues' opportunities for expansion that is part of their pathway to commercial sustainability."

Undermining such arguments are activities such as Arsenal taking their players to Australia for one match in between the end of the WSL season and Euro 2025 qualifiers.

Adding further to the increasingly congested calendar, FIFA also announced a second global women's club competition played annually from 2027 in years when the Women's Club World Cup was not taking place. This would be similar to the men's proposed Intercontinental Cup, which features the six confederation champions with the UEFA representative receiving a bye to the final. Given the strength of the NWSL, it would seem logical that in the women's event the CONCACAF and UEFA teams both enter at the semi-final stage.

Who qualifies for the Women's Club World Cup remains unknown, as does the venue. If following the men's example it will be Brazil, the following year's World Cup hosts, but Saudi Arabia may well be interested which could cause issues.

Looking at the bigger picture, the creation of such a competition highlights the incredible progress of the women's game in the last decade. Five years ago, only Europe and South America even had a continental women's club competition while those in Asia and CONCACAF are just being inaugurated next season.

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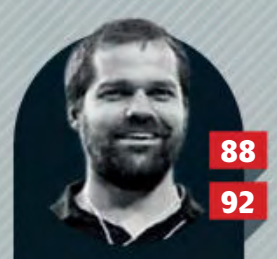

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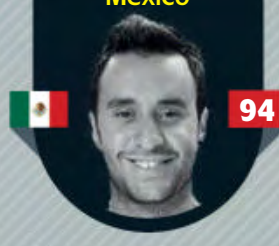

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JOHN DUERDEN

China's hero... Singapore keeper Hassan Sunny makes another save v Thailand

Second round of World Cup qualifying concludes

The race to North America 2026 is whittled down to 18 teams

FIFA was ready to have a party on the final matchday of Asia's second qualifying round for the 2026 World Cup in June. For a while it looked as if China, India and Indonesia were all going to make it through to the final 18 that would compete for Asia's eight automatic qualifying spots, meaning that around three billion people would still be in with a chance of making it to North America. In the end, Indonesia made it comfortably, India missed out and Chinese fans were on tenterhooks right until the end.

In Group C, at the start of play on June 11, China needed a point from their trip to South Korea to take second place, with the top two from each of the nine groups of four progressing. Few at home thought they would get it; after all, they had defeated their neighbours just twice in 37 previous encounters. Korea had already made it through, but were never going to take it easy – the Taegeuk Warriors and their supporters revel in their superiority in this rivalry, in front of 65,000 in Seoul.

Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Lee Kang-in, who is looking increasingly comfortable on the international stage alongside Son Heung-min (who finished joint-top scorer in the round with seven goals alongside Qatar striker Almoez Ali), scored to give Korea a 1-0 win. China, then, just had to pray that Thailand would not beat Singapore by three clear goals.

Their prayers were answered – but only just. In the 86th minute, Jaroensak Wonggorn scored his first international goal to put Thailand 3-1 up in Bangkok, but the hosts could not find the final goal to take themselves through, and China squeezed into the next stage. The War Elephants only had themselves to blame after missing plenty of chances. Chinese supporters took to social media to leave positive reviews for the food stall owned by Singapore goalkeeper Hassan Sunny, but they will know that their team will have to improve if they are to progress.

India started the day second in Group A but needed a win at the home of Asian champions Qatar to be sure. That may have seemed daunting but, having already qualified, the hosts selected a number of young players and India duly took a first-half lead. India were 17 minutes from glory only to concede two late goals, allowing Kuwait to overtake them with a 1-0 win against Afghanistan – coached by ex-Sheffield Wednesday defender Ashley Westwood.

Indonesia are having a great year and deservedly took second place in Group F behind Iraq, who won all six. Helped by a young team and a number of naturalised players, the traditionally underachieving *Merah Putih* finished four points clear of regional rivals Vietnam. Amazingly for a team that has never won Southeast Asia's regional championship, Indonesia are now the sole representatives from the region of around 650 million in the last 18. The likes of Thailand and Vietnam – top dogs for the past few years – have missed out.

Update

Increasingly comfortable on the international stage ...South Korea star Lee Kang-in

FINAL STANDINGS

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Qatar	6	5	1	0	+15	16
2	Kuwait	6	2	1	3	0	7
3	India	6	1	2	3	-4	5
4	Afghanistan	6	1	2	3	-11	5

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Japan	6	6	0	0	+24	18
2	North Korea	6	3	0	3	+4	9
3	Syria	6	2	1	3	-3	7
4	Myanmar	6	0	1	5	-25	1

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	South Korea	6	5	1	0	+19	16
2	China	6	2	2	2	0	8
3	Thailand	6	2	2	2	0	8
4	Singapore	6	0	1	5	-19	1

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Oman	6	4	1	1	+9	13
2	Kyrgyzstan	6	3	2	1	+6	11
3	Malaysia	6	3	1	2	0	10
4	Chinese Taipei	6	0	0	6	-15	0

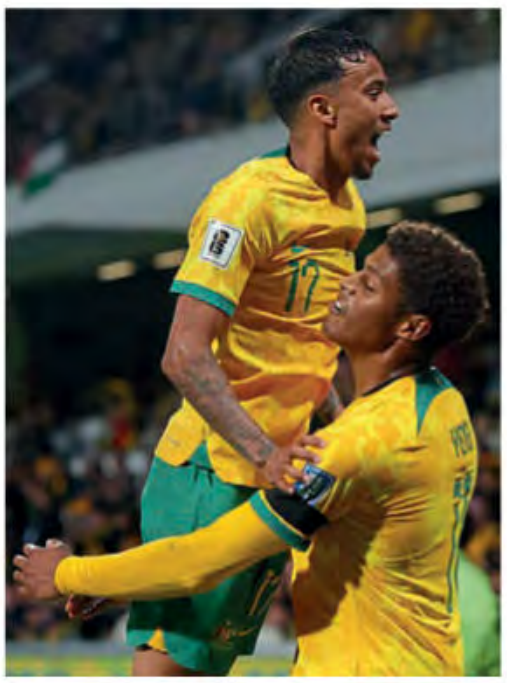
	Group E	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Iran	6	4	2	0	+12	14
2	Uzbekistan	6	4	2	0	+9	14
3	Turkmenistan	6	0	2	4	-10	2
4	Hong Kong	6	0	2	4	-11	2

	Group F	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Iraq	6	6	0	0	+15	18
2	Indonesia	6	3	1	2	0	10
3	Vietnam	6	2	0	4	-4	6
4	Philippines	6	0	1	5	-11	1

	Group G	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Jordan	6	4	1	1	+12	13
2	Saudi Arabia	6	4	1	1	+9	13
3	Tajikistan	6	2	2	2	+4	8
4	Pakistan	6	0	0	6	-25	0

	Group H	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	UAE	6	5	1	0	+14	16
2	Bahrain	6	3	2	1	+8	11
3	Yemen	6	1	2	3	-4	5
4	Nepal	6	0	1	5	-18	1

	Group I	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Australia	6	6	0	0	+22	18
2	Palestine	6	2	2	2	0	8
3	Lebanon	6	1	3	2	-3	6
4	Bangladesh	6	0	1	5	-19	1



Perfect records ...Australia and Japan both won all their group games without conceding a goal

Japan and Australia both won all six games without conceding a goal. The former helped North Korea by thrashing Syria 5-0 in the last game with DPRK overcoming Myanmar to take second. Meanwhile, Palestine finished second behind the Socceroos in their best-ever qualification campaign, sealing the deal with a game to spare against Lebanon.

Jordan won their final game in Saudi Arabia 2-1 to take top spot ahead of the hosts. Both went through but now Jordan will be ranked higher when the draw is made for the next stage. It has been a fine year for the men from Amman who reached the final of the Asian Cup in February and will fancy their chances of a first-ever appearance at the World Cup.

Saudi Arabia are still waiting to find their rhythm under Roberto Mancini, but were never really in danger of not making it. The same can be said of Iran under the lesser-known coach Amir Ghalenoei. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain also made it without much fuss to increase the representation from West Asia to ten.

Central Asia have two in Uzbekistan, who strolled through their group finishing level on points with Iran, and Kyrgyzstan. They finished second behind an Oman team who recovered from a disappointing Asian Cup campaign to take top spot.

It all moves up a gear in September when the fun will really begin. In the third round, the top two from the three groups of six will qualify for North America automatically, while those in third and fourth will go into another group stage. There, the group winners will qualify, and the runners-up will play-off to decide the region's inter-confederational representatives.

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

Second round of World Cup qualifying underway

Favourites perform largely as expected, yet Cayman Islands dominate the headlines

Second round begins...Guyana's Omari Glasgow and Jose Angel Cordoba of Panama fight for the ball in Group D

The Cayman Islands were the unexpected story of the opening games in the second round of 2026 World Cup qualifying in the CONCACAF region, as events on and off the pitch led to joy and disappointment in equal measure for the British Overseas Territory.

All teams involved will have a long time to dwell on these results, as the next set of games won't be played until June 2025. The Cayman Islands will have more to ponder than most after an eventful international window for the Caribbean islands, who went into this qualifying phase as one of the lowest-ranked teams in the region (197th).

A dramatic 91st-minute goal from 18-year-old Joshwa Campbell, against the second-highest-ranked nation in Group A, Antigua & Barbuda, gave the Cayman Islands a late 1-0 victory and sparked wild celebrations in George Town. It was the first time they had won a World Cup qualifying game and also their first clean sheet since the 2019 Nations League, but the jubilation following this historic win soon turned to disappointment as US visa issues prevented them from travelling to Cuba for their second game in the group.

Though travel to the United States was not directly involved, several of the Cayman Islands team are students who study in the US and use the Visa Waiver Program, via the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), which allows them to travel to college without having to go through the visa application process. Since 2021, however, Cuba has been designated by the US Department of State as

Headline group ...players of Honduras and Cuba battle in Group A

Perfect start...Jose Luis Rodriguez scored in both of Panama's victories

a "state sponsor of terrorism" and anyone who travels to the country is then ineligible for the Visa Waiver Program.

Attempts were made to play the game at an alternative venue, but forcing Cuba to play its home games away from Cuba through no fault of their own was inconsistent with the integrity of the competition.

"I don't want to risk any of these boys' ESTAs or student visas being removed, for one game," Alfredo Whittaker, president of the Cayman Islands FA, told local news outlet the *Cayman Compass*.

The Cayman Islands' jubilation soon turned to disappointment as US visa issues prevented them from travelling to Cuba

At the time of writing, the game has been postponed, with CONCACAF yet to make a public decision on its outcome. If arrangements can't be made to play the game at a later date, the Cayman Islands could be forced to forfeit the match, triggering an automatic 3-0 win for Cuba, who lost their opening game 3-1 to group favourites Honduras.

Elsewhere, the beginning of this second round went as expected for the most part, with the higher-ranked teams occupying the top two spots in four of the six groups with two games played.

The top two from each group of five will qualify for the third round where they will then get a chance to join hosts Canada, Mexico, and the United States at the 2026 World Cup.

Curacao and Haiti won two from two in Group C, as did Nicaragua and Panama in Group D.

In Group E, Jamaica would no doubt have liked to win their opening games more convincingly. They may have had one eye on the Copa America as they only managed a 1-0 victory against the Dominican Republic in Kingston, before almost giving up a 3-0 lead in a 3-2 win over Dominica in Roseau. All that matters at this stage, though, are points on the board, and the six collected put Jamaica level with Guatemala. As with Groups C and D, it will be a surprise to see a change in the top two.

Though Trinidad & Tobago occupy the second spot in Group B, they could only draw 2-2 with Grenada in the group opener in Port of Spain, which could make things a little more difficult than they would have hoped further down the line. It could have been worse had they not managed to come back from two goals down in that game, but they are now only one point ahead of St Kitts & Nevis and two behind group favourites Costa Rica who won both their games. The game between Trinidad & Tobago and St Kitts & Nevis will be a key match-up to look out for once qualifying resumes next year.

Group F, where Suriname are the only team with a perfect record after two games, could also be more unpredictable. The team from pot one of the draw, El Salvador, only managed a 0-0 draw with Puerto Rico in San Salvador, which potentially opens up the group and gives Puerto Rico and Suriname hope of reaching the next stage.

The quest for a chance to qualify for the World Cup will continue next summer. In the meantime, the 2026 co-hosts will re-join the rest of CONCACAF in the autumn for the Nations League, when the region will continue to produce storylines on and off the pitch.

CURRENT STANDINGS

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Honduras	2	2	0	0	+7	6
2	Cayman Islands	1	1	0	0	+1	3
3	Antigua & Barbuda	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Bermuda	2	0	1	1	-5	1
5	Cuba	1	0	0	1	-2	0

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Costa Rica	2	2	0	0	+7	6
2	Trinidad & Tobago	2	1	1	0	+6	4
3	St Kitts & Nevis	2	1	0	1	-3	3
4	Grenada	2	0	1	1	-3	1
5	Bahamas	2	0	0	2	-7	0

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Curacao	2	2	0	0	+5	6
2	Haiti	2	2	0	0	+3	6
3	St Lucia	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Aruba	2	0	1	1	-2	1
5	Barbados	2	0	0	2	-5	0

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Nicaragua	2	2	0	0	+7	6
2	Panama	2	2	0	0	+4	6
3	Guyana	2	1	0	1	0	3
4	Montserrat	2	0	0	2	-5	0
5	Belize	2	0	0	2	-6	0

	Group E	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Guatemala	2	2	0	0	+9	6
2	Jamaica	2	2	0	0	+2	6
3	Dominican Rep	2	1	0	1	+3	3
4	Dominica	2	0	0	2	-7	0
5	British Virgin Islands	2	0	0	2	-7	0

	Group F	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Suriname	2	2	0	0	+7	6
2	Puerto Rico	2	1	1	0	+8	4
3	El Salvador	2	1	1	0	+2	4
4	St Vincent/Grenadines	2	0	0	2	-5	0
5	Anguilla	2	0	0	2	-12	0

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Disasters brewing

There is still a long way to go in World Cup qualifying, but dysfunction reigns at Cameroon, Congo and Nigeria after four matchdays in the group stage

When Cameroon broke new ground for African football by reaching the World Cup quarter-finals in 1990, they were coming off strife-filled preparations with in-fighting among the players, a coach who could only speak Russian and a diet of only club matches in the old Yugoslavia to tune-up.

Not ideal preparation by modern, or any standards for that matter, but in adversity the Indomitable Lions triumphed.

That has proven true again some 34 years on as the players shrugged off round after round of posturing and power plays between the country's sports ministry and football federation over control of the national team – one of the country's most valued assets – that threatened to scupper their 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign.

Cameroon's soccer body long ago entered into an agreement that government would pay many of their costs and with it ceded their independence. So much so, that football federation president Samuel Eto'o was left humiliated by sports minister Narcisse Mouelle Kombi who unilaterally appointed the Belgian Marc Brys as coach in April. The subsequent fight over whether he would stay or not led to several public skirmishes, including a rather petulant tirade from Eto'o, when confronting Brys, that went viral. In the end, government rarely loses these fights but what was surprising was the players seemed to turn against Eto'o, leaving the former African Footballer of the Year isolated.

As a result of the petty squabbles, Brys' first training session was without uniforms or balls. But just days later, at home against the Cape Verde Islands, the players showed no ill effects and won a decisive 4-1 victory in Yaounde against the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations quarter-finalists.

Under pressure ...AFCON 2023 finalists Nigeria lost to Benin in June

Controversial appointment... Cameroon head coach Marc Brys

Drought over... Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang

This was followed by a credible point away to arguably their toughest rivals in Group D, Angola. Bryan Mbeumo scored early in Luanda before an own goal by Michael Ngadeu-Ngadjui ensured a 1-1 draw, leaving Cameroon top of the table after four rounds of the preliminaries for the 2026 World Cup finals and putting them on course for a ninth World Cup appearance – a record for an African team.

All of the 53 African countries (Eritrea withdrew before the group stage began) involved in the battle for nine automatic spots in North America in two years' time played in June. But, with six more rounds to follow, resuming only in March next year, there is still much to be decided.

That means there is still a lifeline for Nigeria, who find themselves in troubled waters in World Cup qualification. The Super Eagles were among the seeded teams for the draw but after four matches in Group C are yet to win a game and sit stranded near the bottom of their six-team group with a paltry three points.

There is still a lifeline for Nigeria, who find themselves in troubled waters in World Cup qualification

They had an embarrassing start last November with a 1-1 draw at home to the tiny mountain kingdom of Lesotho, and in June were held again 1-1 in Uyo, this time by South Africa, before losing 2-1 to Benin – managed by their former head coach Gernot Rohr – in neutral Abidjan.

Benin were one of 17 countries forced to move home games because their stadia was condemned as not in a fit-enough state to host international matches. Congo were another, initially forced to move their two home fixtures in June against Niger and Morocco across the river to Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, but then got a late reprieve for their stadium in Brazzaville. With arrangements already made, it was contingent on their opponents agreeing to a late switch in venue. Unsurprisingly, Niger refused and went to Kinshasa as planned, but Congo boycotted the game. They were going to do the same for the match against Morocco, but in the end agreed to go and play it in Agadir, where a hat-trick from Ayoub El Kaabi – fresh from his Europa Conference League final heroics for Olympiacos – ensured a 6-0 win for the World Cup semi-finalists and continued their 100 per cent record.

Jordan Ayew also scored a hat-trick for Ghana in a thrilling 4-3 home win over the Central African Republic, plus got a last-gasp winner away to Mali, for the Black Stars to show some signs of a revival after their dismal showing at January's Africa Cup of Nations finals.

Mohamed Salah took his tally in the qualifiers to five goals – joint-top of the scoring charts alongside his compatriot Trezeguet – with a stunning equaliser as they drew 1-1 away to Guinea-Bissau, where Luis Boa Morte has taken over as coach after leaving his previous job as Fulham assistant.

Another big name got himself on the scoresheet, as Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scored his first international goal since November 2021 in Gabon's 3-2 win against Gambia. The Marseille striker came out of international retirement in May 2023.

Sudan are the surprise packages of the early exchanges as they lead Senegal in Group B. Infrastructure in the country has collapsed because of the civil war and the players fled the country. But under Kwesi Appiah, the ex-Ghana captain who was in charge of his home country at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, they have won three of their four games, including beating Mauritania (2-0) and South Sudan (3-0) away in their June fixtures.

CURRENT STANDINGS

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Egypt	4	3	1	0	+9	10
2	Guinea-Bissau	4	1	3	0	+1	6
3	Burkina Faso	4	1	2	1	+2	5
4	Sierra Leone	4	1	2	1	-1	5
5	Ethiopia	4	0	3	1	-3	3
6	Djibouti	4	0	1	3	-8	1

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Sudan	4	3	1	0	+6	10
2	Senegal	4	2	2	0	+5	8
3	DR Congo	4	2	1	1	+2	7
4	Togo	4	0	3	1	-1	3
5	South Sudan	4	0	2	2	-7	2
6	Mauritania	4	0	1	3	-5	1

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Rwanda	4	2	1	1	+2	7
2	South Africa	4	2	1	1	+1	7
3	Benin	4	2	1	1	+1	7
4	Lesotho	4	1	2	1	+1	5
5	Nigeria	4	0	3	1	-1	3
6	Zimbabwe	4	0	2	2	-4	2

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Cameroon	4	2	2	0	+6	8
2	Libya	4	2	1	1	+1	7
3	Cape Verde	4	2	1	1	0	7
4	Angola	4	1	3	0	+1	6
5	Mauritius	4	1	1	2	-3	4
6	Eswatini	4	0	0	4	-5	0

	Group E	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Morocco	3	3	0	0	+9	9
2	Tanzania	3	2	0	1	0	6
3	Niger	2	1	0	1	0	3
4	Zambia	4	1	0	3	-1	3
5	Congo	2	0	0	2	-8	0
6	Eritrea	0	0	0	0	0	0

	Group F	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Ivory Coast	4	3	1	0	+12	10
2	Gabon	4	3	0	1	+2	9
3	Burundi	4	2	1	1	+2	7
4	Kenya	4	1	2	1	+4	5
5	Gambia	4	1	0	3	0	3
6	Seychelles	4	0	0	4	-20	0

	Group G	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Algeria	4	3	0	1	+4	9
2	Mozambique	4	3	0	1	+1	9
3	Botswana	4	2	0	2	+1	6
4	Guinea	4	2	0	2	0	6
5	Uganda	4	2	0	2	0	6
6	Somalia	4	0	0	4	-6	0

	Group H	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Tunisia	4	3	1	0	+6	10
2	Namibia	4	2	2	0	+5	8
3	Liberia	4	2	1	1	+3	7
4	Malawi	4	2	0	2	+1	6
5	Equatorial Guinea	4	1	0	3	-6	3
6	Sao Tome e Principe	4	0	0	4	-9	0

	Group I	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Comoros	4	3	0	1	+4	9
2	Ghana	4	3	0	1	+2	9
3	Madagascar	4	2	1	1	+3	7
4	Mali	4	1	2	1	+1	5
5	Central African Rep	4	1	1	2	-2	4
6	Chad	4	0	0	4	-8	0

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

Review

Pachuca lift inaugural Champions Cup

Mexican side beat Columbus Crew in the final of revamped continental competition

Mexico's dominance of CONCACAF club football continued as LigaMX side Pachuca recorded a convincing 3-0 win against Columbus Crew of MLS in the 2024 Champions Cup final.

This was the first Champions Cup in its new, expanded format, creating the potential for interesting results in the early rounds involving teams from all corners of the region.

One such moment came when Nicaraguan side Real Esteli defeated

Match-winner... Salomon Rondon

CONCACAF champions...Pachuca players celebrate with the trophy

Mexican giants Club America 2-1 in the first leg of their first-round game, although America eventually progressed with a narrow aggregate win.

MLS side Inter Miami, the team boasting Lionel Messi, were expected to challenge, looking to book their and Messi's place in the expanded 2025 FIFA Club World Cup. Head coach Tata Martino described the Champions Cup as "possibly the most important tournament we will play in" at the start of the season, but Miami were knocked out by Mexican side Monterrey 5-2 on aggregate in the quarter-finals, with Messi having missed the home leg through injury.

It was left to Columbus Crew to represent MLS as its only side to reach the semi-finals, and they proved themselves the best the league has to offer, recording notable wins against Tigres UANL and Monterrey in the quarters and semis. Despite losing the final, their performance was one of the most encouraging seen from an MLS team in a continental competition.

Under impressive head coach Wilfried Nancy, the Crew successfully brought their enterprising style of play from MLS to the CONCACAF stage. That they were able to do this was itself a success – almost a relief. The version of Columbus Crew that had attracted so many admirers domestically was now available to a wider audience.

The Crew's presence also meant MLS teams have appeared in five of the last seven finals, having only appeared in two of the previous 16, marking an obvious recent improvement. Still, the 2022 Seattle Sounders side remains the only MLS team to have won the tournament since its revamp in 2008-09, and Pachuca had few problems overcoming Columbus in this latest final.

CONCACAF club football remains Mexico's domain, but the gap is closing. Pachuca earned the right to play the final at home – the compact Estadio Hidalgo, 8,000 feet above sea level – thanks to their better tournament record in previous rounds.

Before kick-off, home fans unveiled a large tifo that read "*construyendo un legado*" – building a legacy. It was a nod to the city's mining history (the first incarnation of the club was founded by Cornish miners in 1892), and their quest to win a sixth Champions Cup.

The game being held in such an environment gave the Mexican side an initial advantage. The Crew prepared by having altitude tents installed in players' homes and exercising in altitude masks, but there was no accounting for the stomach bug that hit the Columbus camp ahead of the match. Drained from illness as well as the altitude, the Crew never clicked into gear, but Pachuca were deserving winners regardless.

ABOVE: Dejected... Columbus Crew head coach Wilfried Nancy

LEFT: In demand ...Pachuca boss Guillermo Almada

It was a victory built on the kind of squad-building and coaching for which Columbus themselves have been praised. Pachuca's team is a mix of academy players and canny international signings. They don't have the enforced roster restrictions and salary caps of an MLS side but enforce their own strict budget, spending far less on player salaries than most teams north of the border and generally making a profit in the transfer market.

> **CONCACAF club football remains Mexico's domain, but the gap is closing**

A player such as Salomon Rondon, for example, is akin to a classic MLS signing: an international player nearing the end of his career having played in Europe, but still performing at a high enough level to make a difference for a team outside UEFA's top leagues. The Venezuelan scored two of Pachuca's goals in the final, taking him to nine in total for the competition and earning the Champions Cup Golden Boot.

In total, Rondon has scored 21 goals in 28 games since arriving in Mexico in December, and his brace in the final demonstrated his enduring quality. There was a dinked left-footed finish over the goalkeeper after being played in behind the defence by a nice pass from Nelson Deossa, and his second was an instinctive turn and right-footed finish near the penalty spot to make it 3-0 – the perfect way to sign off club football before heading to the Copa America.

Between Rondon's goals, Emilio Rodriguez fired one into the roof of the net at the near post past a helpless Patrick Schulte, whose Goalkeeper of the Tournament award wouldn't have felt like much of a consolation prize.

Pachuca have now appeared in six CONCACAF finals and won them all. Only seven-time winners America have won more. This latest triumph was validation for Pachuca's way of operating and their Uruguayan head coach Guillermo Almada, who has been linked with the Mexico job amidst growing pressure on Jaime Lozano.

While Major League Soccer continues to attract headlines and star names, when it comes to on-field success LigaMX remains the continent's dominant force.

Mexico

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

Another title for Mexico's pantomime villains

Furious reaction as traditional giants America seal 2024 Clausura crown

The Clausura 2024 was one of the most evenly matched and controversial tournaments in Mexican football in recent years. But, when the dust settled, the champions were the same as the previous edition: America, who solidified themselves as the team with the most titles in LigaMX history, boasting 15, to the joy of half the country and the fury of the other half.

America are like the Bayern Munich of Mexican football: traditionally the country's most powerful team but also the most polarising. A few years ago, they released a television commercial with the slogan "*Odiame mas*" ("hate me more") and their fans have since adopted it as a battle cry.

Fans of other teams, especially of America's rivals in the so-called Big Four – Guadalajara, Cruz Azul and Pumas UNAM – accuse them of achieving their record through unethical means, although, as is so often the case with such accusations, without any evidence. Nonetheless, these conspiracies have also been

Clausura champions... America captain Henry Martin holds the trophy aloft

Controversial... Israel Reyes wins a penalty in the Clausura final

Classy playmaker...America's experienced Chilean midfielder Diego Valdes

recently fuelled by the more sensationalist sections of the media, and reached their peak in the latter stages of the tournament.

It was in this context that the Clausura 2024 play-offs were played. For the first time in many years, all of the big four took part, as well as the two powerful Monterrey teams, Tigres UANL and Monterrey, and the two most successful teams in recent years, Toluca and Pachuca. The expectations were for exciting matches with many goals, but instead there were accusations, controversy and little spectacular play.

In the quarter-finals, America faced off against Pachuca, the team that had eliminated them from the CONCACAF Champions Cup on their way to the trophy. They possessed an exciting squad – combining young academy talents and high-quality veteran foreigners – but a small one and, having played two games extra to qualify for the play-offs alongside their Champions Cup exertions, they couldn't quite keep up the pace. After two tight games, an aggregate score of 2-2 gave America their ticket to the semi-finals thanks to their better position in the regular season standings.

> America are like the Bayern Munich of Mexican football: traditionally the country's most powerful team but also the most polarising

There, they faced their arch-rivals Guadalajara (aka Chivas), in the latest edition of the Mexican *Superclasico*. It was 180 tense minutes, with little quality and only one goal. After a 0-0 draw in the first leg, America finally broke the deadlock in the 60th minute of the second leg at the Estadio Azteca, with a header from defender Israel Reyes.

The match ended without incident. However, following the final whistle, TV programmes and social media accounts used a slow-motion image and a photograph to denounce an alleged foul by the goalscorer, claiming a conspiracy to give America the title. The ratings of the shows soared and the social media debate lasted for days, centring on what was actually a non-event.

The final pitted *Las Aguilas* against their other big rivals, Cruz Azul, who returned to prominence under Argentine head coach Martin Anselmi after several disappointing seasons. *La Maquina* surprised everyone by finishing the regular season in second place and comfortably eliminating Pumas and Monterrey to reach the decisive match against their arch-rivals, to whom they had lost in their previous three final head-to-heads, including the 2013 one, heartbreakingly, due to a stoppage-time goal scored by America's then-goalkeeper Moises Munoz.

The matches offered little fireworks. The first leg at Estadio Azul ended 1-1, with both goals scored in the first 16 minutes by Mexican internationals Uriel Antuna and Julian Quinones. In the return leg, Cruz Azul were superior, but wasted a number of good chances.

In the 71st minute, and in one of America's few attacks, Reyes pounced on a loose ball in the box, got a toe to it, before tumbling over a sliding challenge from Cruz Azul wing-back Carlos Rotondi. Referee Marco Ortiz awarded a penalty and stuck to his decision even when VAR recommended he review it. Captain Henry Martin converted, and that was enough to give America the title.

But the controversy on social media lasted for several days after the final whistle. Debate shows divided the country. On one side, Cruz Azul supporters were furious at what they considered a dive, arguing that America had benefitted from another robbery. On the other, America fans claimed the play was correctly called while celebrating with their famous "hate me more."

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Diego Valdes
(America)
The classy 30-year-old Chilean playmaker was the essential cog in a well-oiled machine that included several Mexican and South American internationals.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Salomon Rondon
(Pachuca)
After a disappointing spell at River Plate in Argentina, the Venezuela international rediscovered his form with Pachuca, co-winning the top goalscorer award and winning the CONCACAF Champions Cup.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Martin Anselmi
(Cruz Azul)
After arriving with little fanfare to a disjointed Cruz Azul side, the Argentinian coach made the club contenders again, taking them to the brink of a tenth title.

Australia

SIMON HILL

Central Coast Mariners set the standards

Back-to-back titles and continental success make the New South Wales club Australia's outstanding side

You only have to go back four years to see a very bleak picture for the Central Coast Mariners. After finishing bottom of the A-League in 2019-20 for the third year in a row, there were calls in some quarters for them to be evicted from a competition with no automatic promotion or relegation.

Fast-forward to 2023-24, and the Mariners are the toast of the game Down Under, having completed a remarkable treble of Premiership, Championship and AFC Cup (to be known as the AFC Champions League Two from 2024-25 onwards) – almost certainly the best-ever season by an Australian club.

Their achievements were made all the more praiseworthy by the fact that they lost half of their team from last year's title success, as well as their inspirational coach, Nick Montgomery.

Mark Jackson arrived unheralded as his replacement, via an unconvincing stint at MK Dons, and lost his first four games. But from that point on, they barely looked back, clinching consecutive titles by defeating Melbourne Victory 3-1 in extra-time at a packed Industree Group Stadium.

Josh Nisbet's eye-catching, all-energy midfield displays earned him a maiden international call-up for the Socceroos and the Johnny Warren Medal (presented to the league's standout player), centre-backs Brian Kaltak and Dan Hall formed a formidable central defensive pairing, and the Mariners even dealt with the enforced absence of their top scorer Angel Torres, who was arrested during the run-in. The conveyor belt of young talent shored up off-season departures,

and continued to make the club money in the transfer market.

Beaten Grand Finalists Melbourne Victory had a much-improved campaign after last season's disaster, with veteran Bruno Fornaroli netting 18 goals and earning a recall to Australia's Asian Cup squad in January.

Star midfielder ...Josh Nisbet

Wellington Phoenix missed out on what would have been a first Grand Final after losing to Victory in the semi-finals, but they were undoubtedly the surprise package in their first season under the unassuming Giancarlo Italiano. Striker Kosta Barbarouses in particular was reborn, and over 33,000 fans left disappointed at the end of the home leg of the Victory tie.

Sydney FC, Macarthur and Melbourne City were the other teams to reach the finals courtesy of finising in the top six.

Having joined in 2020, Macarthur are the league's newest members and enjoyed their best season to date on the pitch, finishing fifth in the league and also reaching the knockout stages of the AFC Cup. However, they do now have some off-field issues to contend with after several of their players were implicated in a betting scandal.

> The Mariners' achievements were made all the more praiseworthy by the fact that they lost half of their team from last year's title success

Sydney FC were revitalised after replacing Steve Corica with Ufuk Talay in the dugout. Former Nottingham Forest midfielder Joe Lolley was inspirational, and they ran the Mariners close in the other semi-final.

Melbourne City couldn't deal with a number of departures quite as well as the Mariners, but rallied to make the six. Tolgay Arslan was the pick of their new recruits, with the former Udinese man notching 19 goals in all competitions.

Western Sydney Wanderers fell short of the finals once again – a disappointing end to a campaign that promised so much, and coach Marko Rudan quit for personal reasons soon after their season ended.

Adelaide United were the great entertainers, and were joint-top scorers with 52 goals. Unfortunately, they leaked even more at the other end, and so missed out on the play-offs. Bright young star Nestory Irankunda departs to take on a new challenge with Bayern Munich next season.

Brisbane Roar went through four coaches in one season, which ensured their early promise (after reaching the Australia Cup final, won by Sydney FC), evaporated, while Newcastle Jets continued to be bedevilled by ownership issues, and never really looked likely to make the finals.

Western United avoided the wooden spoon, and finally moved into a new home (although not the one they promised – yet), as they opened a training base at Tarneit. Meanwhile Perth Glory, another club beset by ownership problems, finished last to earn a second wooden spoon in three seasons, despite having the league's Golden Boot winner Adam Taggart, who netted 20 goals for the bottom club.

Title-winning coach...Mark Jackson

Off-field, the A-League continues its precarious, hand-to-mouth existence. The collapse of "Keep Up" – the online app set up (at considerable cost) by the league's umbrella group APL – has once again left the league in dire financial straits.

It is rumoured the central financial distribution to the clubs next season may be as low as $500,000 for the year. With a salary floor of over AUS$2 million, some clubs may find it hard to continue without new revenue streams.

Still, the A-League ploughs defiantly on. Auckland FC will become the 13th club to enter the league next season, Newcastle Jets finally have new owners after a three-year wait, and the league continues to produce some fine young talent – which will now be the roadmap for most clubs in these financially-straitened times. In that regard, the Central Coast Mariners – like they were on the field – are the benchmark.

Triumphant...Central Coast Mariners are crowned A-League champions for 2024

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Josh Nisbet
(Central Coast Mariners)
Only 5ft 2ins tall, but a shift from defensive to attacking midfield has greatly benefitted the academy graduate as he contributed ten league assists.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Clayton Taylor
(Newcastle Jets)
The former Sydney FC junior excelled in his maiden A-League campaign in a struggling Jets team, contributing seven goals from the left wing.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Mark Jackson
(Central Coast Mariners)
You can't do much more than win three trophies in your first season. Thoughtful and tactically astute, he wrung every drop out of a team that criss-crossed Asia while keeping the home fires burning.

Saudi Arabia

JOHN DUERDEN

Al Hilal sweep to another Saudi crown

The first edition of the Saudi Pro League's glamorous new era ends with a familiar title winner

In the end, the Saudi Pro League season didn't quite live up to the excitement that fans felt last summer when a host of world famous names arrived. Neymar, Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante, Roberto Firmino, Riyad Mahrez, Ruben Neves, Kalidou Koulibaly, Sadio Mane and others all joined Cristiano Ronaldo in the Kingdom, but it soon became apparent that there wasn't going to be much of a title race.

Al Hilal were already a winning machine with 18 league titles and four Asian Championships – both records – and quickly hit their stride. In the Riyadh derby in early December, it was first v second but when Hilal ran out 3-0 victors over Al Nassr, it was clear where the trophy was going. In the end, the Blues, led by Portuguese coach Jorge Jesus, won with a margin of 14 points. In the meantime, they also embarked on a world-record winning-streak of 34 games in all competitions.

Runners-up ...Ronaldo's Al Nassr were a distant second

Neymar was ruled out for the season early on just as he was settling in, but Aleksandar Mitrovic enjoyed himself and scored 28 league goals, linking up well with fellow Serbian Sergej Milinkovic-Savic as well as Ruben Neves. Al Hilal scored 101 goals in 34 games and conceded just 23 with Morocco's Yassine Bounou solid in goal, behind Koulibaly as well as a healthy proportion of the Saudi Arabia national team, including Asian Player of the Year Salem Al Dawsari.

Al Nassr in second scored just one fewer goal but the difference was the 42 conceded. Compared to Hilal, Luis Castro – another coach from Portugal – and his team seemed more reliant on the stars doing something special compared to the well-oiled Hilal set-up. Ronaldo was still the biggest name and while the 39-year-old could not quite deliver the league he did set a new goalscoring record with 35 for the season, beating Abderrazak Hamdallah's five-year-old haul by one.

As well as two suspensions (one for an elbow and one for a gesture at fans who had been chanting Lionel Messi's name in his direction), it was a roller-coaster season for the five-time Ballon d'Or winner. There were some fabulous goals and four hat-tricks but it literally ended in tears after a penalty-shootout loss to Hilal in the King's Cup final on May 31. The desire to win still burns brightly.

Al Ahli will be delighted with third and also being the best supported club with an average attendance close to 25,000,

Saudi champions ...Neymar lifts Al Hilal's trophy

Review

around three times the average for the entire league. The fourth of the "Big Four", along with Jeddah rivals Al Ittihad and the Riyadh pair, that had been taken over by the country's Public Investment Fund in 2023 were led by the impressive Mahrez and Allan Saint-Maximin. Roberto Firmino struggled at times but the ex-Liverpool star still scored nine while the top scorer was Firas Al Buraikan, with the Saudi striker bagging 17 to be the leading local goal-getter in the league.

The biggest disappointments were Al Ittihad. The defending champions conceded just 13 goals last season and then added Benzema, Kante and Fabinho. It didn't work out. In November, Nuno Espirito Santo was gone, Benzema had flashes but struggled with injuries and the Tigers slumped into fifth. At the time of writing, it seems unlikely that Argentine coach Marcelo Gallardo will be at the helm next season.

For the rest, it was always going to be difficult to challenge the cashed-up quartet. Six-time champions Al Shabab complained about not having the resources of the Big Four and struggled to eighth.

The most impressive performers had to be Al Taawoun, who finished fourth under Brazilian boss Pericles Chamusca.

There were many eyes on Ettifaq. Under Steven Gerrard, the Easterners from Dammam started well and then went on a run of one win in 12, which had the Englishman in trouble. The club stood by their man and Ettifaq eventually took a decent sixth-place finish – despite the departure of Jordan Henderson – but the challenge is to break into the top four next time. That certainly won't be easy.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Cristiano Ronaldo (Al Nassr)
Has to be after setting a new scoring record of 35 league goals, even if it wasn't enough to give Al Nassr the title.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Abdulmalik Al Oyayari (Al Taawoun)
The 20-year-old midfielder or right-back played a big part in Al Taawoun's successful season.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Pericles Chamsuca (Al Taawoun)
Led the unfashionable Al Taawoun into fourth on a budget that pales alongside Saudi Arabia's Big Four.

United Arab Emirates

JOHN DUERDEN

Relegation disaster for Iniesta

Spanish legend endures torrid season with latest club Emirates, as Al Wasl sweep to the UAE Pro League title

Bad year...Iniesta at his unveiling in August last year

Al Wasl may have won the United Arab Emirates league title by some distance, but the headlines were more focused on what happened at the other end of the table as Andres Iniesta was relegated with Emirates.

It wasn't even that close in the end as the club looked doomed for some time. The Barcelona legend surprised many by heading to the Middle East last summer after five years in Japan with Vissel Kobe who, ironically, went on to clinch their first-ever J. League title four months after Iniesta's exit.

Emirates struggled from the get-go and won just four games out of 26 in the season. Iniesta played most of them and contributed a decent return of five goals.

There has been talk of the club offering him a coaching role. One thing is for sure: Iniesta – out of contract this summer – isn't going to be playing in the second division next season.

Al Wasl won their first title in 17 years and it was a deserved triumph as they finished nine points clear of Shabab Al Ahli. In third were Al Ain, who may have been distracted by winning the Asian Champions League in May. They will be back there next season but it remains to be seen where Andres Iniesta will be when it all kicks off again.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Omar Khrbin (Al Wahda)
The Syria forward scored 19 goals for Al Wahda, not far from half of their entire tally for the season.

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Adama Diallo (Al Wasl)
The 21-year-old Ivorian forward rattled home seven goals in just ten starts for the Emirati champions.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Milos Milojevic (Al Wasl)
Just 41, the Serbian led Al Wasl to a first league title since 2007 and delivered the President's Cup too.

South America

TIM VICKERY

Brazilian clubs eye Copa number six

As the Copa Libertadores group stage concludes, a sixth consecutive Brazilian winner is looking likely

Knockout round opponents... Gremio will take on Libertadores holders Fluminense in the last 16

Fears that the Copa Libertadores has already become a glorified version of the Brazilian Cup were thoroughly confirmed by the group phase of this year's competition.

All seven Brazilian clubs made it through to the last 16 for the knockout rounds. Botafogo and Gremio even lost their opening two matches but still made the cut with a game to spare. Flamengo had to dig themselves out of a hole after picking up just one point from their three away games, yet did so with ease, while Sao Paulo shrugged off an awkward start to make it safely through.

Perhaps the clearest example of Brazilian dominance came from reigning champions Fluminense, who were rarely convincing in any of their group games but still came through unbeaten and in considerable comfort. Atletico Mineiro and Palmeiras were the standout sides, cruising through with barely a problem. The balance of forces may have changed slightly by the time the knockout games are played in the middle of August, but the probability is that the transfer window will strengthen most of the Brazilians still further. And with only two all-Brazilian clashes in the second round, there is the chance that the country could supply five of the quarter-finalists.

The Libertadores was once seen as a competition where Argentina held sway, but those days are gone. Estudiantes and Rosario Central failed to make the cut, and San Lorenzo sneaked unimpressively into the last 16. Talleres and River Plate looked far better, and were drawn together in the next round, ensuring the presence of at least one team from Argentina in the last eight.

River were always seen as the most likely challengers to the Brazilians. They finished the group phase with the best statistical record in the field, and, should they keep progressing, will not meet opposition from Brazil until the semi-finals.

The winners of River v Talleres will take on whoever makes it through from the clash of outsiders, where Chile's Colo-Colo, who just managed to haul themselves over the line, face Junior from Colombia, whose dangerous counter-attack stood out as they went unbeaten through the group phase.

With only two all-Brazilian clashes in the second round, there is the chance that the country could supply five of the quarter-finalists

For the first time since 2017, two Bolivian teams made it through – and the fact that both play at extreme altitude will be a worry to future opponents, especially Flamengo who may have to face the two of them on the way to the semi-finals. In addition to maximum points in La Paz, Bolivar and The Strongest also showed strength on their travels – Bolivar's 4-0 victory away to an otherwise impressive Palestino of Chile was the outstanding result of the entire group phase.

The traditional Uruguayan pair of Penarol and Nacional also made the cut – the first time the country has had two teams in the last 16 since 2009. But it was a blank year for Paraguay and Ecuador, the two countries that have been punching hardest above their weight. Cerro Porteno came close (losing out to Colo-Colo only on the number of away goals), but there is no Paraguayan side in the last 16 for the first time since 2008. And no Ecuadorians for the first time since 2018, though both Independiente del Valle and Liga of Quito (or LDU) can consider themselves unfortunate. They are the last two winners of the Copa Sudamericana, and they now go into this year's version of that competition.

There was no joy for Venezuela and Peru, whose teams were all eliminated in the group phase, respectively, for the seventh and 11th consecutive campaign. The teams from these two countries all finished bottom of their groups. But there is a difference. Brushed aside with ease, the Venezuelans are getting weaker, whereas the Peruvians are at least showing signs of becoming more competitive. But with all of their representatives also eliminated from the Copa Sudamericana, international competition for Peru and Venezuela came to a premature end in May.

Impressive...The Strongest of Bolivia topped Group C ahead of Gremio on goals scored

Paraguayan underdogs light up Copa Sudamericana

Sportivo Ameliano help to limit Brazilian and Argentine dominance

Upset...Sportivo Ameliano celebrate during their vital win v Athletico Paranaense of Brazil

While six countries have representatives left standing in the Libertadores, eight (all bar Peru and Venezuela) still have an interest in the Sudamericana – although that will likely be whittled down during July's play-off round.

Only the eight group winners get automatic tickets to the knockout phase proper in August. Before then, the teams that finished second will have a home-and-away meeting with the group stage's third-placed clubs coming out of the Libertadores.

Predictably, Brazil and Argentina have dominated the competition so far, providing six of the eight group winners. The talent pool is now widened by a strong contingent from the Libertadores from Ecuador and Paraguay. Of the 24 teams still standing, Brazil and Argentina (with seven and five respectively) provide half, while Ecuador have four.

Colombia's Independiente Medellin topped a group without a Brazilian presence. And the story of the competition so far is that of little Sportivo Ameliano from Paraguay, a club that has only been in its country's top flight since 2022. They came through the domestic phase of the Sudamericana with a memorable win over local giants Olimpia – and, in their first international adventure, went on to clinch first place in their group with an even more memorable last-day win away to Athletico Paranaense of Brazil.

Palau

STEVE MENARY

Palau soldier on alone

The isolated Pacific nation faces a long and lonely battle to improve football on the island

Breaking ground ...work at Palau's football stadium

The tiny island of Palau is one of only a handful of officially recognised countries still languishing outside of FIFA, but there are signs that organised football could be resurrected later this year.

Located in the North Pacific, south east of the Philippines, Palau is comprised of an archipelago of half a dozen island groups comprising more than 300 islands.

What football activity there has been has come out of Koror, where around half of the 22,000 population live. Palau sent a football side to the Micronesian Games with some success, finishing third in 1998 and 2018 and runners up in 2014, but this year's games in the Marshall Islands will not include football.

Football's inclusion at the Games might have provided some impetus for Palau, where the local football association was hit by the departure of former president Charles Mitchell and then the COVID-19 pandemic. The league stopped and an annual general meeting could not be held in 2022 due to lack of members.

A two-day school tournament for eight to 12-year-olds has been held annually and a revived league was due to begin in January 2024 only to be delayed by a $1.1 million renovation of Koror's main stadium, which is being financed by the Taiwanese government.

> "We are just volunteers who want to play football and don't have a lot of money for hiring professionals of any kind. The AFC also wanted to know how many official coaches and referees are in the Palau FA. I told them we have none"
>
> Former Palau FA president Leif Toribiong

Local teacher Lukeson Sifix, who recently took over as president of the Palau FA (PFA), says: "We will not be able to host any tournament until the renovation of the track and field is complete, because this is the venue we always used. But for now we will try to find any available gym to use and play futsal to keep us active."

The PFA hopes to get a league started at the stadium in the autumn. The number of teams will depend on the amount of available expats, who have previously helped keep the sport going. Many expats have left Palau, but former US ambassador John Hennessey-Niland has been helping out with the PFA's organisation.

Under the previous president Leif Toribiong, the PFA did reach out for some form of regional affiliation only to be rebuffed. Eschewing the Oceania Football Confederation – as another Pacific territory, Northern Mariana, also did – the PFA made contact with the Asian Football Confederation but were knocked back in March 2023.

"PFA did apply for membership to AFC and they did reply to our request," says Toribiong. "[They said that the] PFA still needs to work on a few things on programme and grow our local membership.

"[The AFC requested an] internal organisation chart and employee job description for PFA. I know our Articles of Incorporation break down what our four officers – president, vice president, secretary and treasurer – and board members' responsibilities are in our organisation.

"I wrote to AFC that we only have those members on the board and no one else employed with our organisation. We are just volunteers who want to play football and don't have a lot of money for hiring professionals of any kind. The AFC also wanted to know how many official coaches and referees are in the PFA. I told them we have none. PFA never had a real coach and no one had official training or certification to be a referee. I'm not sure what AFC wants us to do about it."

Outside help might provide a stimulus, but that looks unlikely to come from any of football's official bodies as Palau soldier on alone.

Club Football

EUROPE

2023-24 FA CUP

Final

May 25 – Wembley
Manchester City 1 (Doku 87)
Manchester United 2 (Garnacho 30, Mainoo 39)

2023-24 SCOTTISH CUP

Final

May 25 – Glasgow
Celtic 1 (Idah 90)
Rangers 0

2023-24 GERMAN CUP

Final

May 25 – Berlin
Kaiserslautern 0
Bayer Leverkusen 1 (Xhaka 16)

2023-24 FRENCH CUP

Final

May 25 – Lille
Lyon 1 (O'Brien 55)
Paris Saint-Germain 2 (Dembele 22, Fabian 34)

2023-24 PORTUGUESE CUP

Final

May 26 – Lisbon
Porto 2 (Evanilson 25, Taremi 100 pen)
Sporting 1 (St Juste 20)
After Extra-Time

2023-24 EFL PLAY-OFFS

Championship

Semi-Final – 1st Leg

May 12 – Norwich
Norwich City 0
Leeds United 0

May 12 – West Bromwich
West Bromwich Albion 0
Southampton 0

Semi-Final – 2nd Leg

May 16 – Leeds
Leeds United 4 (Gruev 7, Piroe 20, Rutter 40, Summerville 68)
Norwich City 0
Leeds United win 4-0 on aggregate

May 17 – Southampton
Southampton 3 (Smallbone 49, A. Armstrong 78, 86 pen)
West Bromwich Albion 1 (Kipre 90+7)
Southampton win 3-1 on aggregate

Final

May 26 – Wembley
Leeds United 0
Southampton 1 (A. Armstrong 24)

League One

Semi-Final – 1st Leg

May 3 – Barnsley
Barnsley 1 (Cosgrove 75)
Bolton Wanderers 3 (Charles 23, 53 pen, Williams 90+4)

May 4 – Oxford
Oxford United 1 (Moore 53)
Peterborough United 0

Semi-Final – 2nd Leg

May 7 – Bolton
Bolton Wanderers 2 (Collins 43, Toal 45+1)
Barnsley 3 (Cosgrove 36, 75, Phillips 64)
Bolton Wanderers win 5-4 on aggregate

May 8 – Peterborough
Peterborough United 1 (Knight 41)
Oxford United 1 (Brannagan 45+3 pen)
Oxford United win 2-1 on aggregate

Final

May 18 – Wembley
Bolton Wanderers 0
Oxford United 2 (Murphy 31, 42)

League Two

Semi-Final – 1st Leg

May 6 – Crewe
Crewe Alexandra 0
Doncaster Rovers 2 (Molyneux 34, Biggins 48)

May 7 – Crawley
Crawley Town 3 (Kelly 5, Williams 45+1, Darcy 65)
MK Dons 0

Semi-Final – 2nd Leg

May 10 – Doncaster
Doncaster Rovers 0
Crewe Alexandra 2 (Demetriou 6, Maxwell 16 og)
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
Crewe Alexandra win 4-3 on penalties

May 11 – Milton Keynes
MK Dons 1 (Dean 45+1)
Crawley Town 5 (Williams 3, Orsi 30, 48, 90+2, Roles 80)
Crawley Town win 8-1 on aggregate

Final

May 19 – Wembley
Crewe Alexandra 0
Crawley Town 2 (Orsi 41, L. Kelly 85)

Final Tables 2023-24

ALBANIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egnatia* (C)	36	18	9	9	51	38	63
Partizani*	36	17	12	7	51	29	63
Vllaznia*	36	16	11	9	41	34	59
Skenderbeu*	36	15	6	15	37	39	51
Tirana	36	13	11	12	56	49	50
Teuta	36	13	11	12	36	35	50
Dinamo City	36	13	8	15	42	43	47
Laci**	36	10	16	10	37	31	46
Erzeni (R)	36	7	11	18	29	57	32
Kukesi (R)	36	6	9	21	31	56	27

*Advance to finals stage
**Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 19: Laci 3-1 Flamurtari (*AET*)

Finals Stage

Semi-Finals

May 17-19: Partizani 1-0 Skenderbeu; Egnatia 0-0 Vllaznia (*Egnatia advance as higher seeds*)

Third Place Play-Off

May 24: Skenderbeu 3-2 Vllaznia

Final

May 26: Partizani 0-1 Egnatia

ANDORRA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UE Santa Coloma (C)	27	20	6	1	57	12	66
Inter Club d'Escalades	27	20	3	4	66	16	63
Atletic Club d'Escalades	27	19	3	5	71	21	60
FC Santa Coloma	27	19	2	6	64	23	59
Penya Encarnada	27	13	5	9	45	34	44
Ordino	27	10	6	11	33	29	36
Pas de la Casa	27	3	9	15	24	46	18
Esperanca	27	4	2	21	27	81	14
Carroi* (R)	27	3	4	20	19	77	13
Atletic America (R)	27	3	2	22	22	89	11

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 25: Ranger's 0-1 Carroi
May 29: Carroi 0-2 Ranger's (agg 1-2, *AET*)

ARMENIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pyunik (C)	36	24	10	2	84	28	82
Noah	36	26	2	8	69	33	80
Ararat-Armenia	36	23	6	7	73	34	75
Urartu	36	13	11	12	49	49	50
Alashkert	36	13	6	17	54	56	45
Ararat Yerevan	36	13	6	17	39	50	45
West Armenia	36	11	4	21	43	73	37
Shirak	36	8	9	19	28	46	33
Van*	36	8	8	20	32	67	32
BKMA (R)	36	7	6	23	32	67	27

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

AUSTRIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Red Bull Salzburg	22	15	5	2	45	12	50
Sturm Graz	22	13	7	2	37	15	46
LASK	22	9	8	5	26	18	35
Austria Klagenfurt	22	8	10	4	29	27	34
Hartberg	22	9	7	6	33	28	34
Rapid Vienna	22	8	9	5	38	21	33
Austria Vienna	22	9	6	7	25	22	33
Wolfsberger	22	8	6	8	29	32	30
Rheindorf Altach	22	4	7	11	17	30	19
Blau-Weiss Linz	22	4	7	11	22	38	19
Tirol	22	4	2	16	20	42	14
Austria Lustenau	22	2	4	16	13	49	10

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom six enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season halved and rounded down*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sturm Graz (C)	32	19	10	3	56	23	44
Red Bull Salzburg	32	20	7	5	74	29	42
LASK	32	14	10	8	43	33	34
Rapid Vienna	32	11	12	9	47	35	28
Hartberg*	32	12	9	11	49	52	28
Austria Klagenfurt	32	9	12	11	40	50	22

*Advance to European play-offs

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wolfsberger*	32	12	10	10	41	39	31
Austria Vienna*	32	12	10	10	35	34	29
Blau-Weiss Linz	32	7	11	14	33	48	22
Rheindorf Altach	32	6	13	13	27	40	21
Tirol	32	7	5	20	29	55	19
Austria Lustenau (R)	32	4	9	19	22	58	16

*Advance to European play-offs

European Play-Offs

Semi-Final

May 21: Wolfsberger 1-2 Austria Vienna

Final

May 24: Austria Vienna 2-1 Hartberg
May 28: Hartberg 0-1 Austria Vienna (agg 1-3)

AZERBAIJAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qarabag (C)	36	26	5	5	97	37	83
Zira	36	16	10	10	33	22	58
Sabah	36	17	7	12	50	40	58
Sumgayit	36	15	12	9	37	38	57
Neftchi Baku	36	16	8	12	51	40	56
Turan Tovuz	36	13	9	14	53	53	48
Sabail	36	11	9	16	50	60	42
Araz Naxcivan	36	9	9	18	31	50	36
Kapaz	36	9	8	19	39	67	35
Gabala (R)	36	7	5	24	30	64	26

BELGIUM

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Union Saint-Gilloise	30	21	7	2	63	31	70
Anderlecht	30	18	9	3	58	30	63
Antwerp	30	14	10	6	55	27	52
Club Brugge	30	14	9	7	62	29	51
Cercle Brugge	30	14	5	11	44	34	47
Genk	30	12	11	7	51	31	47
Gent	30	12	11	7	53	38	47
Mechelen	30	13	6	11	39	34	45
Sint-Truiden	30	10	10	10	35	46	40
Standard Liege	30	8	10	12	33	41	34
Westerlo	30	7	9	14	42	54	30
OH Leuven	30	7	8	15	34	47	29
Sporting Charleroi	30	7	8	15	26	48	29
AS Eupen	30	7	3	20	24	58	24
Kortrijk	30	6	6	18	22	57	24
RWDM	30	5	8	17	31	67	23

• *Top six advance to championship round, teams 7th to 12th enter European play-offs, bottom four enter relegation round. Points obtained during regular season halved and rounded up for championship round and European play-offs, but carried over in full for relegation round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Brugge (C)	40	21	12	7	83	35	50
Union Saint-Gilloise	40	25	9	6	80	43	49
Anderlecht	40	22	11	7	70	42	46
Cercle Brugge	40	17	9	14	57	47	37
Genk*	40	16	12	12	59	48	37
Antwerp	40	16	10	14	62	45	32

*Advance to European play-off final

European Play-Offs

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gent*	40	20	11	9	80	48	48
Mechelen	40	18	7	15	59	52	39
Sint-Truiden	40	13	14	13	49	61	33
OH Leuven	40	11	11	18	46	59	30
Westerlo	40	9	12	19	59	74	24
Standard Liege	40	8	15	17	45	68	22

*Advance to European play-off final

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sporting Charleroi	36	12	9	15	37	52	45
Kortrijk*	36	8	7	21	29	67	31
RWDM (R)	36	7	9	20	39	76	30
AS Eupen (R)	36	8	4	24	29	66	28

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 19: Lommel 0-1 Kortrijk
May 26: Kortrijk 4-2 Lommel (agg 5-2, *AET*)

European Play-Off Final

Jun 2: Genk 0-1 Gent

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Borac Banja Luka (C)	33	24	6	3	68	26	78
Zrinjski Mostar	33	24	4	5	76	27	76
Velez Mostar	33	16	11	6	50	28	59
Sarajevo*	33	16	8	9	57	38	53
Posusje	33	13	9	11	35	29	48
Zeljeznicar	33	13	4	16	35	36	43
Sloga Doboj	33	13	3	17	37	50	42
Siroki Brijeg	33	11	6	16	37	45	39
GOSK Gabela	33	8	10	15	38	64	34
Igman Konjic	33	9	6	18	40	67	33
Tuzla City (R)	33	7	6	20	45	69	27
Zvijezda 09 (R)	33	6	3	24	33	72	21

*Deducted 3 points

BULGARIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ludogorets	30	24	3	3	78	15	75
CSKA Sofia	30	19	6	5	50	19	63
Cherno More	30	18	8	4	47	25	62
Lokomotiv Plovdiv	30	16	7	7	50	34	55
Levski Sofia	30	16	6	8	45	26	54
Krumovgrad	30	12	8	10	35	35	44
Botev Plovdiv	30	12	8	10	47	33	44
CSKA 1948	30	11	10	9	30	26	43
Arda	30	11	6	13	32	32	39
Slavia Sofia	30	9	6	15	28	45	33
Beroe	30	9	6	15	24	42	33
Pirin Blagoevgrad	30	7	9	14	23	41	30
Hebar	30	8	6	16	32	44	30

Lokomotiv Sofia	30	8	4	18	22	56	28
Botev Vratsa	30	6	4	20	22	53	22
Etar	30	3	5	22	17	56	14

• *Top six advance to championship round, teams 7th to 10th enter European round, bottom six enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ludogorets (C)	35	26	4	5	87	24	82
Cherno More	35	22	9	4	56	26	75
CSKA Sofia*	35	20	7	8	56	27	67
Levski Sofia	35	19	7	9	50	30	64
Lokomotiv Plovdiv	35	17	7	11	53	44	58
Krumovgrad	35	13	10	12	45	45	49

**Advance to European play-off*

European Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
CSKA 1948*	36	13	13	10	35	30	52
Arda	36	14	9	13	39	35	51
Botev Plovdiv	36	12	9	15	50	42	45
Slavia Sofia	36	12	7	17	35	51	43

**Advance to European play-off*

European Play-Off

May 31: CSKA Sofia 0-2 CSKA 1948

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Beroe	35	12	6	17	30	46	42
Lokomotiv Sofia	35	11	6	18	30	58	39
Hebar	35	9	7	19	35	49	34
Botev Vratsa*	35	9	6	20	28	56	33
Pirin Blagoevgrad (R)	35	7	11	17	26	48	32
Etar (R)	35	3	8	24	22	66	17

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 30: Botev Vratsa 1-1 Marek Dupnitsa (*AET, Botev Vratsa win 4-2 on pens*)

CROATIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dinamo Zagreb (C)	36	25	7	4	67	30	82
Rijeka	36	23	5	8	69	30	74
Hajduk Split	36	21	5	10	54	26	68
Osijek	36	16	9	11	62	43	57
Lokomotiva Zagreb	36	12	15	9	52	45	51
Varazdin	36	10	12	14	39	47	42
Gorica	36	11	8	17	35	50	41
Istra 1961	36	10	11	15	36	54	41
Slaven Belupo	36	9	6	21	43	69	33
Rudes (R)	36	1	6	29	22	85	9

CYPRUS

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
APOEL	26	18	5	3	54	16	59
Aris Limassol	26	18	2	6	53	21	56
AEK Larnaca	26	15	7	4	44	26	52
Pafos	26	15	5	6	48	20	50
Omonia Nicosia	26	14	7	5	49	30	49
Anorthosis	26	14	5	7	38	23	47
Apollon Limassol	26	10	8	8	37	27	38
Nea Salamis	26	10	6	10	34	39	36
AEL Limassol	26	9	3	14	34	45	30
Ethnikos Achna	26	6	8	12	39	56	26
Karmiotissa	26	5	5	16	31	53	20
AEZ Zakakiou	26	2	10	14	28	59	16
Othellos Athienou	26	3	6	17	20	52	15
Doxa Katokopias	26	3	3	20	14	56	12

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom eight enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
APOEL (C)	36	22	7	7	63	24	73
AEK Larnaca	36	21	10	5	57	31	73
Omonia Nicosia	36	20	9	7	62	37	69
Aris Limassol	36	20	5	11	63	34	65
Pafos	36	18	8	10	60	33	62
Anorthosis	36	15	8	13	46	42	53

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Apollon Limassol	40	18	12	10	64	38	66
AEL Limassol	40	15	9	16	61	68	54
Nea Salamis	40	14	9	17	52	61	51
Ethnikos Achna	40	13	11	16	70	79	50
Karmiotissa	40	10	10	20	58	77	40
Doxa Katokopias (R)	40	10	5	25	34	77	35
Othellos Athienou (R)	40	8	9	23	48	77	33
AEZ Zakakiou (R)	40	2	12	26	40	100	18

CZECH REPUBLIC

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sparta Prague	30	24	4	2	70	26	76
Slavia Prague	30	22	6	2	62	23	72
Viktoria Plzen	30	19	5	6	67	33	62
Banik Ostrava	30	13	6	11	48	39	45
Mlada Boleslav	30	12	8	10	50	46	44
Slovacko	30	11	8	11	39	40	41
Slovan Liberec	30	10	10	10	46	46	40
Sigma Olomouc	30	10	7	13	40	45	37
Hradec Kralove	30	9	10	11	32	38	37
Teplice	30	9	9	12	31	40	36
Bohemians 1905	30	8	11	11	29	40	35
Jablonec	30	6	12	12	35	45	30
Pardubice	30	7	7	16	29	42	28
Karvina	30	6	7	17	30	52	25
Zlin	30	5	10	15	36	61	25
Ceske Budejovice	30	6	6	18	34	62	24

• *Top six advance to championship round, teams 7th to 10th enter European play-offs, bottom six enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sparta Prague (C)	35	27	6	2	82	30	87
Slavia Prague	35	26	7	2	76	24	85
Viktoria Plzen	35	21	7	7	76	40	70
Banik Ostrava	35	14	7	14	56	48	49
Mlada Boleslav*	35	13	8	14	51	59	47
Slovacko	35	12	8	15	45	56	44

**Advance to European play-off final*

European Play-Offs

Play-Offs

May 5: Teplice 2-0 Slovan Liberec; Hradec Kralove 3-1 Sigma Olomouc
May 12: Slovan Liberec 1-2 Teplice (agg 1-4); Sigma Olomouc 1-3 Hradec Kralove (agg 2-6)

Semi-Final

May 19: Teplice 0-1 Hradec Kralove
May 25: Hradec Kralove 2-0 Teplice (agg 3-0)

Final

May 31: Mlada Boleslav 3-1 Hradec Kralove

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jablonec	35	9	14	12	45	50	41
Pardubice	35	11	7	17	39	47	40
Bohemians 1905	35	9	12	14	34	48	39
Karvina*	35	8	8	19	38	62	32
Ceske Budejovice*	35	7	8	20	41	70	29
Zlin (R)	35	5	12	18	40	69	27

**Enter promotion-relegation play-offs*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

May 30: Vyskov 0-1 Karvina; Ceske Budejovice 2-1 Taborsko
Jun 2: Karvina 1-0 Vyskov (agg 2-0); Taborsko 1-1 Ceske Budejovice (agg 2-3)

DENMARK

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Midtjylland	22	15	3	4	43	23	48
Brondby	22	14	5	3	44	20	47
Copenhagen	22	14	3	5	45	23	45
Nordsjaelland	22	10	7	5	35	21	37
AGF Aarhus	22	9	9	4	26	21	36
Silkeborg	22	8	3	11	28	32	27
OB Odense	22	6	6	10	25	32	24
Lyngby	22	6	5	11	27	39	23
Viborg	22	6	5	11	24	37	23
Randers	22	5	8	9	23	37	23
Vejle	22	4	7	11	19	26	19
Hvidovre	22	2	5	15	17	45	11

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom six enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Midtjylland (C)	32	19	6	7	62	43	63
Brondby	32	18	8	6	60	35	62
Copenhagen*	32	18	5	9	64	38	59
Nordsjaelland	32	16	10	6	60	34	58
AGF Aarhus	32	11	11	10	42	46	44
Silkeborg	32	10	6	16	39	50	36

**Advance to European play-off*

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Randers*	32	10	11	11	41	49	41
Viborg	32	11	7	14	38	48	40
Vejle	32	9	9	14	32	36	36
Lyngby	32	9	9	14	39	53	36
OB Odense (R)	32	8	8	16	37	48	32
Hvidovre (R)	32	4	8	20	27	61	20

**Advance to European play-off*

European Play-Off

May 31: Copenhagen 2-1 Randers

ENGLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Man City (C)	38	28	7	3	96	34	91
Arsenal	38	28	5	5	91	29	89
Liverpool	38	24	10	4	86	41	82
Aston Villa	38	20	8	10	76	61	68
Tottenham	38	20	6	12	74	61	66
Chelsea	38	18	9	11	77	63	63
Newcastle	38	18	6	14	85	62	60
Man United	38	18	6	14	57	58	60
West Ham	38	14	10	14	60	74	52
Crystal Palace	38	13	10	15	57	58	49
Brighton	38	12	12	14	55	62	48
Bournemouth	38	13	9	16	54	67	48
Fulham	38	13	8	17	55	61	47
Wolves	38	13	7	18	50	65	46
Everton*	38	13	9	16	40	51	40
Brentford	38	10	9	19	56	65	39
Nott'm Forest**	38	9	9	20	49	67	32
Luton Town (R)	38	6	8	24	52	85	26
Burnley (R)	38	5	9	24	41	78	24
Sheffield United (R)	38	3	7	28	35	104	16

**Deducted 8 points*
***Deducted 4 points*

FRANCE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PSG (C)	34	22	10	2	81	33	76
Monaco	34	20	7	7	68	42	67
Brest	34	17	10	7	53	34	61
Lille	34	16	11	7	52	34	59
Nice	34	15	10	9	40	29	55
Lyon	34	16	5	13	49	55	53
Lens	34	14	9	11	45	37	51
Marseille	34	13	11	10	52	41	50
Reims	34	13	8	13	42	47	47
Rennes	34	12	10	12	53	46	46
Toulouse	34	11	10	13	42	46	43
Montpellier*	34	10	12	12	43	48	41
Strasbourg	34	10	9	15	38	50	39
Nantes	34	9	6	19	30	55	33
Le Havre	34	7	11	16	34	45	32
Metz** (R)	34	8	5	21	35	58	29
Lorient (R)	34	7	8	19	43	66	29
Clermont (R)	34	5	10	19	26	60	25

**Deducted 1 point*
***Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 30: Saint-Etienne 2-1 Metz
Jun 2: Metz 2-2 Saint-Etienne (agg 3-4, *AET*)

GERMANY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
B Leverkusen (C)	34	28	6	0	89	24	90
Stuttgart	34	23	4	7	78	39	73
Bayern Munich	34	23	3	8	94	45	72
RB Leipzig	34	19	8	7	77	39	65
B Dortmund	34	18	9	7	68	43	63
Eintracht Frankfurt	34	11	14	9	51	50	47
Hoffenheim	34	13	7	14	66	66	46
Heidenheim	34	10	12	12	50	55	42
Werder Bremen	34	11	9	14	48	54	42
Freiburg	34	11	9	14	45	58	42
Augsburg	34	10	9	15	50	60	39
Wolfsburg	34	10	7	17	41	56	37
Mainz	34	7	14	13	39	51	35
B M'gladbach	34	7	13	14	56	67	34
Union Berlin	34	9	6	19	33	58	33
Bochum*	34	7	12	15	42	74	33
Cologne (R)	34	5	12	17	28	60	27
Darmstadt (R)	34	3	8	23	30	86	17

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 23: Bochum 0-3 Fortuna Dusseldorf
May 27: Fortuna Dusseldorf 0-3 Bochum (agg 3-3, *AET, Bochum win 6-5 on pens*)

GIBRALTAR

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lincoln Red Imps	20	17	1	2	63	12	52
St Joseph's	20	16	2	2	49	15	50
Bruno's Magpies	20	13	3	4	52	28	42
Mons Calpe	20	8	5	7	31	28	29
Manchester 62	20	9	1	10	39	41	28
Europa Point	20	8	4	8	27	22	28
Lynx	20	8	3	9	29	31	27
Europa	20	6	2	12	25	34	20
Glacis United	20	5	1	14	21	47	16
Lions Gibraltar	20	3	4	13	16	50	13
College 1975	20	3	2	15	21	65	11

• *Top six advance to championship round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lincoln Red Imps (C)	25	21	2	2	86	15	65
St Joseph's	25	20	3	2	62	16	63
Bruno's Magpies	25	14	4	7	55	36	46
Europa Point	25	10	5	10	32	31	35
Mons Calpe	25	9	6	10	37	39	33
Manchester 62	25	9	2	14	44	64	29

GREECE

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PAOK	26	19	3	4	66	21	60
AEK Athens	26	17	8	1	60	25	59
Olympiacos	26	18	3	5	58	24	57
Panathinaikos	26	17	5	4	62	21	56
Aris	26	12	6	8	39	29	42
Lamia	26	9	7	10	35	44	34
Asteras Tripolis	26	9	4	13	36	46	31
Atromitos	26	6	10	10	29	44	28
Panserraikos	26	6	9	11	28	45	27
OFI	26	5	10	11	26	44	25
Kifisia	26	4	9	13	31	56	21
Panaitolikos	26	4	8	14	26	46	20
Volos	26	4	7	15	24	52	19
PAS Giannina	26	3	9	14	25	48	18

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom eight enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PAOK (C)	36	25	5	6	87	34	80
AEK Athens	36	23	9	4	80	35	78
Olympiacos	36	23	5	8	78	36	74
Panathinaikos	36	22	6	8	82	37	72
Aris	36	16	7	13	51	44	55
Lamia	36	9	8	19	43	79	35

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panserraikos	33	9	11	13	37	53	38
Asteras Tripolis	33	11	5	17	40	55	38
Panaitolikos	33	9	9	15	36	49	36
OFI	33	7	14	12	36	50	35
Atromitos	33	7	13	13	36	53	34
Volos	33	8	9	16	36	58	33
Kifisia (R)	33	6	10	17	38	68	28
PAS Giannina (R)	33	4	11	18	33	62	23

HUNGARY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ferencvaros (C)	33	23	5	5	80	30	74
Paks	33	17	7	9	51	42	58
Puskas Akademia	33	15	10	8	60	35	55
Fehervar	33	16	6	11	55	40	54
Debrecen	33	14	6	13	49	48	48
Kecskemet	33	13	6	14	45	45	45
Diosgyor	33	12	9	12	50	56	45
MTK Budapest	33	12	8	13	43	62	44
Zalaegerszeg	33	12	7	14	54	60	43
Ujpest	33	11	4	18	45	67	37
Kisvarda (R)	33	9	4	20	40	55	31
Mezokovesd (R)	33	5	6	22	31	63	21

ISRAEL

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Maccabi Tel Aviv	26	19	5	2	55	20	62
Maccabi Haifa*	26	17	6	3	55	18	55
Hapoel Be'er Sheva	26	15	4	7	45	19	49
Hapoel Haifa	26	14	5	7	38	32	47
Maccabi Bnei Raina	26	8	10	8	27	26	34
Bnei Sakhnin**	26	7	13	6	26	31	33
Hapoel Jerusalem	26	8	7	11	28	33	31
Maccabi Petah Tikva	26	8	6	12	31	48	30
Maccabi Netanya	26	8	4	14	29	41	28
Hapoel Hadera	26	8	4	14	21	38	28
Hapoel Tel Aviv**	26	6	9	11	29	37	26
Beitar Jerusalem***	26	8	6	12	34	34	25
Ashdod	26	5	7	14	20	42	22
Hapoel Petah Tikva	26	3	10	13	20	39	19

*Deducted 2 points
**Deducted 1 point
***Deducted 5 points

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom eight enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Maccabi Tel Aviv (C)	36	26	7	3	75	25	85
Maccabi Haifa*	36	23	7	6	75	28	74
Hapoel Be'er Sheva	36	19	4	13	55	40	61
Hapoel Haifa	36	18	5	13	48	47	59
Maccabi Bnei Raina	36	11	11	14	38	44	44
Bnei Sakhnin**	36	10	15	11	39	46	44

*Deducted 2 points
**Deducted 1 point

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hapoel Jerusalem	33	12	7	14	38	39	43
Maccabi Petah Tikva	33	11	7	15	44	57	40
Maccabi Netanya	33	11	5	17	36	48	38
Ashdod	33	9	10	14	29	45	37
Beitar Jerusalem*	33	11	8	14	45	40	36
Hapoel Hadera	33	10	6	17	28	49	36
Hapoel Tel Aviv** (R)	33	8	10	15	35	51	33
Hapoel Petah Tikva (R)	33	4	12	17	25	51	24

*Deducted 5 points
**Deducted 1 point

ITALY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Inter (C)	38	29	7	2	89	22	94
Milan	38	22	9	7	76	49	75
Juventus	38	19	14	5	54	31	71
Atalanta	38	21	6	11	72	42	69
Bologna	38	18	14	6	54	32	68
Roma	38	18	9	11	65	46	63
Lazio	38	18	7	13	49	39	61
Fiorentina	38	17	9	12	61	46	60
Torino	38	13	14	11	36	36	53
Napoli	38	13	14	11	55	48	53
Genoa	38	12	13	13	45	45	49
Monza	38	11	12	15	39	51	45
Verona	38	9	11	18	38	51	38
Lecce	38	8	14	16	32	54	38
Udinese	38	6	19	13	37	53	37
Cagliari	38	8	12	18	42	68	36
Empoli	38	9	9	20	29	54	36
Frosinone (R)	38	8	11	19	44	69	35
Sassuolo (R)	38	7	9	22	43	75	30
Salernitana (R)	38	2	11	25	32	81	17

KOSOVO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ballkani (C)	36	23	9	4	62	26	78
Llapi	36	21	8	7	56	27	71
Drita	36	19	10	7	49	27	67
Malisheva	36	17	6	13	58	45	57
Prishtina	36	11	16	9	41	32	49
Gjilani	36	11	12	13	43	38	45
Dukagjini	36	10	15	11	38	48	45
Feronikeli*	36	12	8	16	39	47	44
Fushe Kosova (R)	36	4	8	24	20	64	20
Liria Prizren (R)	36	2	8	26	26	78	14

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Jun 1:
Feronikeli 1-0 Prishtina e Re

LIECHTENSTEIN

2023-24 Liechtenstein Cup

Pre-Qualifier

Aug 11: Triesen III 0-3 Vaduz III

Round of 16

Aug 22-23: Ruggell 1-8 Vaduz; Schaan 1-2 Eschen/Mauren; Eschen/Mauren II 1-2 Triesen (*AET*); Triesen II 0-8 Triesenberg; Vaduz II 0-1 Balzers; Schaan II 6-1 Triesenberg
Aug 29: Ruggell II 2-0 Balzers II
Sep 13: Vaduz III 2-2 Eschen/Mauren III (*AET, Vaduz III win 5-4 on pens*)

Quarter-Finals

Oct 24-25: Ruggell II 1-2 Triesenberg (*AET*); Vaduz III 1-6 Balzers; Schaan II 1-4 Triesen; Eschen/Mauren 1-2 Vaduz (*AET*)

Semi-Finals

Apr 9: Balzers 0-5 Vaduz; Triesenberg 2-0 Triesen

Final

May 8: Vaduz 5-0 Triesenberg

LUXEMBOURG

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Differdange 03 (C)	30	19	9	2	70	23	66
Swift Hesperange	30	18	7	5	66	35	61
F91 Dudelange	30	19	4	7	59	36	61
Progres Niederkorn	30	16	7	7	54	35	55
Jeunesse d'Esch	30	13	6	11	51	41	45
UNA Strassen	30	11	11	8	40	38	44
Victoria Rosport	30	12	8	10	45	44	44
UT Petange	30	11	6	13	48	47	39
Mondorf-les-Bains	30	10	8	12	55	53	38
Racing Union	30	11	5	14	46	58	38
Wiltz 71	30	7	12	11	43	52	33
Monnerich	30	8	8	14	33	57	32
UN Kaerjeng 97* (R)	30	7	7	16	31	49	28
Fola Esch*	30	8	4	18	33	61	28
Marisca Mersch (R)	30	7	5	18	40	62	26
Schifflange 95 (R)	30	6	7	17	36	59	25

*Enter promotion-relegation play-offs

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

May 31: UN Kaerjeng 97 1-3 Hostert (*AET*)
Jun 2: Fola Esch 2-2 Rumelange (*AET, Fola Esch win 4-1 on pens*)

MALTA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hamrun Spartans (C)	26	19	5	2	61	16	62
Floriana	26	18	3	5	53	19	57
Sliema Wanderers	26	14	8	4	34	12	50
Marsaxlokk	26	12	7	7	40	23	43
Birkirkara	26	9	9	8	28	27	36
Naxxar Lions	26	9	8	9	32	35	35
Hibernians	26	9	8	9	29	28	35
Balzan	26	8	10	8	26	28	34
Gzira United	26	9	6	11	38	33	33
Mosta	26	7	10	9	19	32	31
Santa Lucia (R)	26	8	6	12	25	41	30
Valletta (R)	26	6	9	11	26	31	27
Sirens (R)	26	3	7	16	17	50	16
Gudja United (R)	26	0	6	20	14	67	6

MOLDOVA

Phase I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sheriff Tiraspol	14	11	1	2	35	7	34
Petrocub Hincesti	14	8	4	2	29	7	28
Milsami Orhei	14	9	1	4	20	14	28
Zimbru Chisinau	14	8	1	5	17	11	25
Balti	14	7	1	6	26	22	22
Dacia-Buiucani	14	3	3	8	14	32	12
Floresti*	14	3	1	10	18	33	10
Spartanii Sportul** (R)	14	0	2	12	9	42	2

*Re-won promotion back to Super Liga via Liga 1 (second tier) Phase II
**Failed to regain promotion back to Super Liga

• *Top six advance to Super Liga Phase II with Phase I points wiped out, bottom two enter Liga 1 (second tier) Phase II*

Phase II

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Petrocub Hincesti (C)	10	7	3	0	30	5	24
Sheriff Tiraspol	10	5	3	2	16	9	18
Zimbru Chisinau	10	5	2	3	16	12	17
Milsami Orhei	10	2	4	4	11	12	10
Balti	10	2	2	6	7	22	8
Dacia-Buiucani	10	0	4	6	6	26	4

MONTENEGRO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Decic (C)	36	20	10	6	55	27	70
Mornar	36	17	13	6	45	32	64
Buducnost	36	17	10	9	66	43	61
Sutjeska	36	13	14	9	46	36	53
Jezero	36	14	9	13	41	38	51
Petrovac	36	11	15	10	42	40	48
Arsenal Tivat	36	9	15	12	43	58	42
Jedinstvo*	36	8	11	17	43	56	35
Mladost DG* (R)	36	9	7	20	37	59	34
Rudar (R)	36	7	6	23	25	54	27

*Enter promotion-relegation play-offs

Relegation Play-Offs

May 31: Otrant-Olympic 1-0 Mladost DG; Podgorica 1-3 Jedinstvo
Jun 4: Jedinstvo 0-0 Podgorica (agg 3-1); Mladost DG 2-2 Otrant-Olympic (agg 2-3)

NETHERLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PSV (C)	34	29	4	1	111	21	91
Feyenoord	34	26	6	2	92	26	84
Twente	34	21	6	7	69	36	69
AZ	34	19	8	7	70	39	65
Ajax	34	15	11	8	74	61	56
NEC*	34	14	11	9	68	51	53
Utrecht*	34	13	11	10	49	47	50
Sparta Rotterdam*	34	14	7	13	51	48	49
Go Ahead Eagles*	34	12	10	12	47	46	46
Fortuna Sittard	34	9	11	14	37	56	38
Heerenveen	34	10	7	17	53	70	37
PEC Zwolle	34	9	9	16	45	67	36
Almere City	34	7	13	14	33	59	34
Heracles	34	9	6	19	41	74	33
RKC Waalwijk	34	7	8	19	38	56	29
Excelsior** (R)	34	6	11	17	50	73	29
Volendam (R)	34	4	7	23	34	88	19
Vitesse*** (R)	34	6	6	22	30	74	6

*Enter European play-offs
**Enter promotion-relegation play-offs
***Deducted 18 points

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

First Round

May 13-14:
NAC Breda 3-1 Roda JC; Emmen 2-2 Dordrecht; De Graafschap 2-3 ADO Den Haag
May 17-18: Roda JC 0-5 NAC Breda (agg 1-8); Dordrecht 0-1 Emmen (agg 2-3); ADO Den Haag 2-2 De Graafschap (agg 5-4)

Semi-Finals

May 21-22: NAC Breda 1-1 Emmen; ADO Den Haag 1-2 Excelsior
May 25: Emmen 0-3 NAC Breda (agg 1-4); Excelsior 7-1 ADO Den Haag (agg 9-2)

Final

May 28: NAC Breda 6-2 Excelsior
Jun 2: Excelsior 4-1 NAC Breda (agg 6-7)

European Play-Offs

Semi-Finals

May 23: NEC 1-2 Go Ahead Eagles; Utrecht 3-1 Sparta Rotterdam

Final

May 26: Utrecht 1-2 Go Ahead Eagles (*AET*)

NORTH MACEDONIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Struga (C)	33	20	4	9	56	33	64
Shkendija	33	18	10	5	55	27	64
Shkupi	33	17	11	5	42	23	62
Tikvesh	33	12	8	13	41	40	44
Sileks	33	10	13	10	36	40	43
Brera Strumica	33	11	9	13	34	33	42
Voska Sport	33	10	12	11	37	41	42
Rabotnicki	33	12	6	15	29	34	42
Gostivari	33	9	15	9	32	38	42
Vardar*	33	10	7	16	28	43	37
Makedonija GP (R)	33	8	5	20	29	44	29
Bregalnica (R)	33	6	10	17	27	50	28

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 26: Vardar 2-0 Detonit Plachkovica

NORTHERN IRELAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Larne (C)	38	27	9	2	85	21	90
Linfield	38	26	7	5	82	40	85
Cliftonville	38	23	6	9	80	43	75
Crusaders*	38	19	7	12	61	43	64
Glentoran*	38	17	9	12	74	43	60
Coleraine*	38	12	10	16	47	69	46
Carrick Rangers*	38	15	5	18	54	72	50
Dungannon Swifts	38	13	8	17	64	69	47
Loughgall	38	13	6	19	60	68	45
Glenavon	38	11	4	23	45	70	37
Ballymena United**	38	8	4	26	29	70	28
Newry City (R)	38	4	5	29	26	99	17

*Enter European play-offs
**Enter promotion-relegation play-off

• *Teams play each other three times (33 games in total) before league is split into a top and bottom half*

European Play-Offs

Semi-Finals

May 1: Crusaders 3-1 Carrick Rangers; Glentoran 0-3 Coleraine

Final

May 1: Crusaders 3-2 Coleraine

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Apr 30: Institute 1-0 Ballymena United
May 3: Ballymena United 2-0 Institute (agg 2-1)

POLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jagiellonia Bialystok (C)	34	18	9	7	77	45	63
Slask Wroclaw	34	18	9	7	50	31	63
Legia Warsaw	34	16	11	7	51	39	59
Pogon Szczecin	34	16	7	11	59	38	55
Lech Poznan	34	14	11	9	47	41	53
Gornik Zabrze	34	15	8	11	45	41	53
Rakow Czestochowa	34	14	10	10	54	39	52
Zaglebie Lubin	34	13	8	13	43	50	47
Widzew Lodz	34	13	7	14	45	46	46
Piast Gliwice	34	9	16	9	38	35	43
Stal Mielec	34	11	10	13	42	48	43
Puszcza Niepolomice	34	9	13	12	39	49	40
Cracovia	34	8	15	11	45	46	39
Korona Kielce	34	8	14	12	40	44	38
Radomiak Radom	34	10	8	16	41	58	38
Warta Poznan (R)	34	9	10	15	33	43	37
Ruch Chorzow (R)	34	6	14	14	40	55	32
LKS Lodz (R)	34	6	6	22	34	75	24

PORTUGAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sporting (C)	34	29	3	2	96	29	90
Benfica	34	25	5	4	77	28	80
Porto	34	22	6	6	63	27	72
Braga	34	21	5	8	71	50	68
Vitoria Guimaraes	34	19	6	9	52	38	63
Moreirense	34	16	7	11	36	35	55
Arouca	34	13	7	14	54	50	46
Famalicao	34	10	12	12	37	41	42
Casa Pia	34	10	8	16	38	50	38
Farense	34	10	7	17	46	51	37
Rio Ave	34	6	19	9	38	43	37
Gil Vicente	34	9	9	16	42	52	36
Estoril	34	9	6	19	49	58	33
Estrela	34	7	12	15	33	53	33
Boavista	34	7	11	16	39	62	32
Portimonense* (R)	34	8	8	18	39	72	32
Vizela (R)	34	5	11	18	36	66	26
Chaves (R)	34	5	8	21	31	72	23

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 25: Portimonense 1-2 AVS
Jun 2: AVS 2-1 Portimonense (agg 4-2)

ROMANIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
FCSB	30	19	7	4	53	28	64
Rapid Bucuresti	30	15	10	5	55	32	55
CFR Cluj	30	15	8	7	54	29	53
Universitatea Craiova	30	13	10	7	47	38	49
Farul Constanta	30	11	10	9	37	38	43
Sepsi	30	12	7	11	43	34	43
Universitatea Cluj	30	10	12	8	35	38	42
UTA Arad	30	10	10	10	36	43	40
Hermannstadt	30	9	13	8	36	31	40
Petrolul Ploiesti	30	7	14	9	29	32	35
Otelul Galati	30	6	16	8	31	36	34
Politehnica Iasi	30	7	12	11	33	44	33
U Craiova 1948	30	9	4	17	43	50	31
Dinamo Bucuresti	30	8	5	17	22	41	29
Voluntari	30	6	10	14	31	49	28
Botosani	30	3	12	15	30	52	21

• *Top six advance to play-off round, bottom ten enter play-out round with points obtained during regular season halved and rounded up*

Play-Off Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
FCSB (C)	10	5	2	3	12	11	49
CFR Cluj	10	6	1	3	19	14	46
Universitatea Craiova*	10	6	1	3	18	14	44
Farul Constanta	10	4	2	4	19	20	36
Sepsi	10	3	3	4	17	17	34
Rapid Bucuresti	10	1	1	8	13	22	32

**Enter European play-offs*

Play-Out Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UTA Arad	9	5	2	2	15	11	37
Otelul Galati*	9	6	1	2	11	7	36
Hermannstadt	9	4	2	3	13	7	34
Universitatea Cluj*	9	3	3	3	12	10	33
Petrolul Ploiesti	9	3	2	4	8	14	29
Politehnica Iasi	9	3	1	5	7	8	27
Dinamo Bucuresti**	9	2	4	3	10	12	25
Botosani**	9	4	2	3	11	11	25
Voluntari (R)	9	2	4	3	11	10	24
U Craiova 1948 (R)	9	1	3	5	8	16	22

**Enter European play-offs as clubs licensed to participate in UEFA competitions in 2024-25*
***Enter promotion-relegation play-offs*

European Play-Offs

Semi-Finals

May 19: Otelul Galati 0-2 Universitatea Cluj

Final

May 26: Universitatea Craiova 1-1 Universitatea Cluj (*AET, Universitatea Craiova win 5-4 on pens*)

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

May 17-20: Botosani 1-0 Mioveni; Dinamo Bucuresti 2-0 Csikszereda
May 24-27: Mioveni 0-1 Botosani (agg 0-2); Csikszereda 0-0 Dinamo Bucuresti (agg 0-2)

RUSSIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zenit (C)	30	17	6	7	52	27	57
Krasnodar	30	16	8	6	45	29	56
Dynamo Moscow	30	16	8	6	53	39	56
Lokomotiv Moscow	30	14	11	5	52	38	53
Spartak Moscow	30	14	8	8	41	32	50
CSKA Moscow	30	12	12	6	56	40	48
Rostov	30	12	7	11	43	46	43
Rubin Kazan	30	11	9	10	31	38	42
Krylia Sovetov Samara	30	11	8	11	46	44	41
Akhmat Grozny	30	10	5	15	33	45	35
Fakel Voronezh	30	7	11	12	22	31	32
Orenburg	30	7	10	13	34	41	31
Nizhny Novgorod*	30	8	6	16	29	51	30
Ural* (R)	30	7	9	14	30	46	30
Baltika (R)	30	7	5	18	33	42	26
Sochi (R)	30	5	9	16	37	48	24

**Enter promotion-relegation play-offs*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

May 29: Ural 0-2 Akron Tolyatti; Nizhny Novgorod 1-2 Arsenal Tula
Jun 1: Akron Tolyatti 1-2 Ural (agg 3-2); Arsenal Tula 0-2 Nizhny Novgorod (agg 2-3)

SAN MARINO

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Virtus (C)	30	26	1	3	61	20	79
La Fiorita*	30	25	2	3	71	18	77
Tre Penne*	30	20	3	7	76	30	63
Cosmos*	30	18	6	6	78	28	60
Murata*	30	19	2	9	56	22	59
Tre Fiori*	30	17	6	7	56	30	57
San Giovanni*	30	14	3	13	55	42	45
Juvenes/Dogana*	30	14	3	13	44	47	45
Folgore*	30	11	6	13	44	37	39
Fiorentino*	30	11	5	14	40	55	38
Domagnano*	30	9	8	13	31	42	35
Faetano	30	8	2	20	44	79	26
Libertas	30	6	5	19	32	56	23
San Marino Academy	30	6	4	20	32	74	22
Cailungo	30	4	2	24	15	77	14
Pennarossa	30	2	2	26	18	96	8

**Enter European play-offs*

European Play-Offs

First Round

Apr 24: Folgore 2-0 Fiorentino; Juvenes/Dogana 3-2 Domagnano

Quarter-Finals

Apr 27-28: Cosmos 1-2 San Giovanni; Tre Fiori 0-0 Murata; La Fiorita 1-0 Folgore; Tre Penne 3-0 Juvenes/Dogana
Apr 30-May 1: San Giovanni 0-3 Cosmos (agg 2-4); Murata 2-1 Tre Fiori (agg 2-1); Folgore 0-0 La Fiorita (agg 0-1); Juvenes/Dogana 4-2 Tre Penne (agg 4-5)

Semi-Finals

May 4: La Fiorita 1-3 Murata; Cosmos 1-1 Tre Penne
May 11: Murata 0-1 La Fiorita (agg 3-2); Tre Penne 0-0 Cosmos (agg 1-1, *Tre Penne win on away goals*)

Final

May 18: Murata 2-3 Tre Penne (*AET*)

SCOTLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Celtic (C)	38	29	6	3	95	30	93
Rangers	38	27	4	7	87	32	85
Hearts	38	20	8	10	54	42	68
Kilmarnock	38	14	14	10	46	44	56
St Mirren	38	13	8	17	46	52	47
Dundee	38	10	12	16	49	68	42
Aberdeen	38	12	12	14	48	52	48
Hibernian	38	11	13	14	52	59	46
Motherwell	38	10	13	15	56	59	43
St Johnstone	38	8	11	19	29	54	35
Ross County*	38	8	11	19	38	67	35
Livingston (R)	38	5	10	23	29	70	25

**Enter promotion-relegation play-offs*

• *Teams play each other three times (33 games in total) before league is split into a top and bottom half*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

Quarter-Finals

May 7: Airdrieonians 2-2 Partick Thistle
May 10: Partick Thistle 2-1 Airdrieonians (agg 4-3)

Semi-Finals

May 14: Partick Thistle 1-2 Raith Rovers
May 17: Raith Rovers 1-2 Partick Thistle (agg 3-3, *AET, Raith Rovers win 4-3 on pens*)

Final

May 23: Raith Rovers 1-2 Ross County
May 26: Ross County 4-0 Raith Rovers (agg 6-1)

SERBIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Red Star Belgrade	30	25	2	3	77	22	77
Partizan Belgrade	30	22	4	4	66	35	70
TSC Backa Topola	30	17	9	4	57	29	60
Vojvodina	30	14	8	8	49	42	50
Radnicki Kragujevac	30	16	2	12	46	46	50
Cukaricki	30	13	9	8	44	33	48
Mladost Lucani	30	11	7	12	30	40	40
Napredak Krusevac	30	11	6	13	31	39	39
Novi Pazar	30	10	6	14	35	40	36
Spartak Subotica	30	10	4	16	29	44	34
Radnicki Nis	30	9	6	15	33	40	33
IMT	30	9	5	16	34	47	32
Javor-Matis	30	9	4	17	28	45	31
Vozdovac	30	7	9	14	38	48	30
Zeleznicar Pancevo	30	7	5	18	34	59	26
Radnik Surdulica	30	3	8	19	19	41	17

• *Top eight advance to championship round, bottom eight enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Red Star Belgrade (C)	37	31	3	3	94	28	96
Partizan Belgrade	37	24	6	7	80	48	78
TSC Backa Topola	37	22	9	6	75	39	75
Vojvodina	37	17	10	10	62	50	61
Radnicki Kragujevac	37	19	4	14	64	61	61
Cukaricki	37	16	9	12	57	47	57
Mladost Lucani	37	13	7	17	38	53	46
Napredak Krusevac	37	11	7	19	36	66	40

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Novi Pazar	37	14	6	17	44	47	48
Spartak Subotica	37	13	8	16	36	47	47
IMT	37	11	9	17	43	53	42
Radnicki Nis	37	11	8	18	40	48	41
Javor-Matis* (R)	37	11	7	19	34	51	40
Zeleznicar Pancevo*	37	10	9	18	47	65	39
Vozdovac (R)	37	9	11	17	46	58	38
Radnik Surdulica (R)	37	3	9	25	24	59	18

**Enter promotion-relegation play-offs*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

May 29-30: Tekstilac 1-0 Javor-Matis; Indija 1-2 Zeleznicar Pancevo
Jun 3: Javor-Matis 1-1 Tekstilac (agg 1-2); Zeleznicar Pancevo 2-0 Indija (agg 4-1)

SLOVAKIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slovan Bratislava	22	18	3	1	57	16	57
Zilina	22	12	5	5	40	30	41
Spartak Trnava	22	12	3	7	31	22	39
DAC	22	10	7	5	31	21	37
Podbrezova	22	10	4	8	40	34	34
Ruzomberok	22	9	7	6	28	31	34
Trencin	22	9	7	6	31	23	34
Dukla Banska Bystrica	22	9	7	6	38	30	34
Skalica	22	6	5	11	19	25	23
Kosice	22	4	5	13	19	45	17
Zemplin Michalovce	22	1	7	14	19	42	10
Zlate Moravce	22	0	4	18	14	48	4

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom six enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slovan Bratislava (C)	32	23	4	5	76	31	73
DAC	32	16	10	6	49	32	58
Spartak Trnava	32	18	3	11	47	29	57
Zilina	32	16	7	9	54	45	55
Ruzomberok	32	12	11	9	38	43	47
Podbrezova	32	11	4	17	49	60	37

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dukla Banska Bystrica	32	14	9	9	50	41	51
Trencin	32	13	10	9	48	34	49
Skalica	32	11	7	14	35	38	40
Kosice	32	7	6	19	27	56	27
Zemplin Michalovce*	32	6	9	17	29	48	27
Zlate Moravce (R)	32	2	6	24	21	66	12

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 21: Petrzalka 2-1 Zemplin Michalovce
May 25: Zemplin Michalovce 2-0 Petrzalka (agg 3-2)

SLOVENIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Celje (C)	36	24	7	5	75	34	79
Maribor	36	19	10	7	67	35	67
Olimpija Ljubljana	36	18	10	8	69	44	64
Bravo	36	12	14	10	42	42	50
Koper	36	12	12	12	51	49	48
Mura	36	11	10	15	42	55	43
Domzale	36	13	4	19	52	60	43
Rogaska (R)	36	10	6	20	37	64	36
Radomlje	36	7	12	17	33	51	33
Aluminij (R)	36	8	7	21	37	71	31

SPAIN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Madrid (C)	38	29	8	1	87	26	95
Barcelona	38	26	7	5	79	44	85
Girona	38	25	6	7	85	46	81
Atletico Madrid	38	24	4	10	70	43	76
Athletic Club	38	19	11	8	61	37	68
Real Sociedad	38	16	12	10	51	39	60
Real Betis	38	14	15	9	48	45	57
Villarreal	38	14	11	13	65	65	53
Valencia	38	13	10	15	40	45	49
Alaves	38	12	10	16	36	46	46
Osasuna	38	12	9	17	45	56	45
Getafe	38	10	13	15	42	54	43
Celta Vigo	38	10	11	17	46	57	41
Sevilla	38	10	11	17	48	54	41
Mallorca	38	8	16	14	33	44	40
Las Palmas	38	10	10	18	33	47	40
Rayo Vallecano	38	8	14	16	29	48	38
Cadiz (R)	38	6	15	17	26	55	33
Almeria (R)	38	3	12	23	43	75	21
Granada (R)	38	4	9	25	38	79	21

SWITZERLAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Young Boys (C)	38	23	8	7	76	34	77
Lugano	38	20	5	13	67	51	65
Servette	38	18	10	10	59	43	64
Zurich	38	16	12	10	53	41	60
St Gallen	38	16	9	13	60	51	57
Winterthur	38	13	10	15	60	71	49
Luzern	38	13	10	15	47	53	49
Basel	38	13	10	15	45	52	49
Yverdon-Sport	38	13	8	17	50	71	47
Lausanne-Sport	38	11	12	15	48	53	45
Grasshoppers*	38	10	8	20	41	49	38
Stade-Lausanne Ouchy (R)	38	7	8	23	40	77	29

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

• *Teams play each other three times (33 games in total) before league is split into a top and bottom half*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 26: Grasshoppers 1-1 Thun
May 31: Thun 1-2 Grasshoppers (agg 2-3)

TURKEY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Galatasaray (C)	38	33	3	2	92	26	102
Fenerbahce	38	31	6	1	99	31	99
Trabzonspor	38	21	4	13	69	50	67
Istanbul Basaksehir	38	18	7	13	57	43	61
Kasimpasa	38	16	8	14	62	65	56
Besiktas	38	16	8	14	52	47	56
Sivasspor	38	14	12	12	47	54	54
Alanyaspor	38	12	16	10	53	50	52
Rizespor	38	14	8	16	48	58	50
Antalyaspor	38	12	13	13	44	49	49
Gaziantep	38	12	8	18	50	57	44
Adana Demirspor	38	10	14	14	54	61	44
Samsunspor	38	11	10	17	42	52	43
Kayserispor*	38	11	12	15	44	57	42
Hatayspor	38	9	14	15	45	52	41
Konyaspor	38	9	14	15	40	53	41
Ankaragucu (R)	38	8	16	14	46	52	40
Fatih Karagumruk (R)	38	10	10	18	49	52	40
Pendikspor (R)	38	9	10	19	42	73	37
Istanbulspor* (R)	38	4	7	27	27	80	16

**Deducted 3 points*

UKRAINE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shakhtar Donetsk (C)	30	22	5	3	63	24	71
Dynamo Kyiv	30	22	3	5	72	28	69
Kryvbas Kryvyi Rih	30	17	6	7	51	30	57

Dnipro-1	30	14	10	6	40	27	52
Polissya	30	14	8	8	39	30	50
Rukh Lviv	30	12	13	5	44	31	49
LNZ Cherkasy	30	11	8	11	31	34	41
Oleksandriya	30	8	10	12	30	38	34
Vorskla Poltava	30	9	6	15	30	46	33
Zorya Luhansk	30	7	11	12	29	37	32
Kolos Kovalivka	30	7	11	12	22	31	32
Chornomorets	30	10	2	18	38	47	32
Veres Rivne*	30	6	10	14	31	46	28
Obolon Kyiv*	30	5	11	14	18	41	26
Mynai (R)	30	5	10	15	27	50	25
Metalist 1925 Kharkiv (R)	30	5	8	17	32	57	23

Enter promotion-relegation play-offs

Promotion-Relegation Play-Offs

May 29: Epitsentr 1-1 Veres Rivne; Obolon Kyiv 1-0 Livyi Bereh
Jun 2: Veres Rivne 3-1 Epitsentr (agg 4-2); Livyi Bereh 1-1 Obolon Kyiv (agg 1-2)

WALES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
The New Saints (C)	32	30	2	0	117	18	92
Connah's Quay Nomads	32	18	5	9	70	43	59
Bala Town	32	13	12	7	38	31	51
Newtown*	32	13	5	14	49	46	44
Caernarfon Town*	32	11	8	13	52	70	41
Cardiff MU*	32	10	9	13	35	63	36
Penybont*	32	14	7	11	46	37	43
Haverfordwest County	32	11	10	11	39	40	43
Barry Town United	32	7	11	14	36	54	32
Aberystwyth Town	32	7	6	19	27	57	27
Colwyn Bay (R)	32	7	4	21	34	66	25
Pontypridd United (R)	32	8	7	17	23	41	22

Enter European play-offs, Cardiff Metropolitan University and Penybont deducted 3 points and 6 points respectively

• *Teams play each other twice (22 games in total) before league is split into a top and bottom half*

European Play-Offs

Semi-Finals

May 10-11: Caernarfon Town 2-0 Cardiff Metropolitan University; Newtown 0-5 Penybont

Final

May 18: Caernarfon Town 3-1 Penybont

SOUTH AMERICA

2024 COPA LIBERTADORES

Group A

May 29 – Rio deJaneiro
Fluminense (Bra) 3 (Keno 47, Marcelo 52, John Kennedy 81)
Alianza Lima (Per) 2 (Arregui 7, Serna 50)

May 29 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Carrizo 35)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Palacios 23 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fluminense (Q)	6	4	2	0	9	5	14
Colo-Colo (Q)	6	1	3	2	4	5	6
Cerro Porteno*	6	1	3	2	4	5	6
Alianza Lima	6	0	4	2	5	7	4

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group B

May 29 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Lucas Moura 45+4 pen, Luciano 90)
Talleres (Arg) 0

May 29 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 2 (Fydriszewski 9, Diaz 18)
Cobresal (Chi) 1 (Coelho 71)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sao Paulo (Q)	6	4	1	1	10	3	13
Talleres (Q)	6	4	1	1	10	6	13
Barcelona SC*	6	1	3	2	6	9	6
Cobresal	6	0	1	5	3	11	1

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group C

May 29 – Curitiba
Gremio (Bra) 4 (Soteldo 14, Joao Pedro 50, Everton Galdino 67, Gustavo Nunes 89)
The Strongest (Bol) 0

May 29 – La Paz
Estudiantes (Arg) 3 (Correa 12, 49, Ascacibar 63)
Huachipato (Chi) 4 (Rodriguez 37, Romero 45+1 og, M. Gutierrez 51, Villanueva 90+5)

Jun 4 – Talcahuano
Huachipato (Chi) 0
Gremio (Bra) 1 (Diego Costa 6)

Jun 8 – Curitiba
Gremio (Bra) 1 (Cristaldo 48)
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Mendez 83)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
The Strongest (Q)	6	3	1	2	8	6	10
Gremio (Q)	6	3	1	2	7	5	10
Huachipato*	6	2	2	2	7	9	8
Estudiantes	6	1	2	3	7	9	5

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group D

May 28 – Quito
LDU (Ecu) 2 (Arce 44, Alzugaray 67)
Universitario (Per) 0

May 28 – Barranquilla
Junior (Col) 0
Botafogo (Bra) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Junior (Q)	6	2	4	0	7	4	10
Botafogo (Q)	6	3	1	2	7	6	10
LDU*	6	2	1	3	6	6	7
Universitario	6	1	2	3	5	9	5

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group E

May 28 – Rio deJaneiro
Flamengo (Bra) 3 (Pedro 7, 44, Vargas 25 og)
Millonarios (Col) 0

May 28 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 3 (Bizama 35 og, Martinez 46 og, Da Costa 87)
Palestino (Chi) 1 (Chamorro 68)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar (Q)	6	4	1	1	13	9	13
Flamengo (Q)	6	3	1	2	11	4	10
Palestino*	6	2	1	3	6	11	7
Millonarios	6	0	3	3	6	12	3

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group F

May 30 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 0
San Lorenzo (Arg) 0

May 30 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Diaz 20, 55)
Liverpool (Uru) 1 (Gonzales 35)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palmeiras (Q)	6	4	2	0	14	5	14
San Lorenzo (Q)	6	2	2	2	6	9	8
Ind del Valle*	6	2	1	3	8	6	7
Liverpool	6	1	1	4	6	14	4

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group G

May 28 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 2 (Fernandez 32, 83)
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Modica 66)

May 28 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 4 (Pedrinho 28, 61, Alisson 40, Hulk 90+3)
Caracas (Ven) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Mineiro (Q)	6	5	0	1	14	6	15
Penarol (Q)	6	4	0	2	12	5	12
Rosario Central*	6	2	1	3	8	7	7
Caracas	6	0	1	5	3	19	1

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group H

May 30 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Borja 51, 85)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0

May 30 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 2 (O. Cardozo 29, Silva 41)
Nacional (Uru) 1 (Romero 13)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
River Plate (Q)	6	5	1	0	12	3	16
Nacional (Q)	6	3	1	2	8	7	10
Libertad*	6	2	1	3	7	8	7
Dep Tachira	6	0	1	5	2	11	1

Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Knockout Stage Draw

Round of 16

San Lorenzo (Arg) v Atletico Mineiro (Bra); Gremio (Bra) v Fluminense (Bra); Colo-Colo (Chi) v Junior (Col); Talleres (Arg) v River Plate (Arg); Nacional (Uru) v Sao Paulo (Bra); Botafogo (Bra) v Palmeiras (Bra); Flamengo (Bra) v Bolivar (Bol); Penarol (Uru) v The Strongest (Bol)

• *Ties take place August 13-15 and August 20-22. Teams drawn first play the first leg at home*

2024 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Group A

May 29 – Gobernador Costa
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 0
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 1 (Aguilera 90 og)

May 29 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 4 (Garcia 47, Baroja 53 og, Leon 55, Y. Moreno 83)
Always Ready (Bol) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ind Medellin (Q)	6	4	1	1	16	7	13
Always Ready*	6	3	2	1	10	7	11
Defensa y Justicia	6	1	2	3	4	8	5
U Cesar Vallejo	6	1	1	4	6	14	4

Enter play-offs

Group B

May 30 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Rafa Silva 80)
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 0

May 30 – Concepcion
Union La Calera (Chi) 0
Alianza (Col) 1 (Figueroa 73 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cruzeiro (Q)	6	3	3	0	8	3	12
U Catolica*	6	3	2	1	8	2	11
Alianza	6	1	2	3	5	10	5
Union La Calera	6	1	1	4	1	7	4

Enter play-offs

Group C

May 28 – Barueri
Internacional (Bra) 1 (Borre 39)
Belgrano (Arg) 2 (Chavarria 45, 45+3)

May 28 – Manta
Delfin (Ecu) 4 (Messiniti 4, Elordi 22, Mino 75, Angulo 76)
Real Tomayapo (Bol) 3 (Graneros 1, Noble 11, Rioja 32)

Jun 4 – Tarija
Real Tomayapo (Bol) 0
Internacional (Bra) 2 (Bruno Gomes 31, Alario 89)

Jun 8 – Caxias do Sul
Internacional (Bra) 1 (Alario 68)
Delfin (Ecu) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belgrano (Q)	6	3	3	0	7	3	12
Internacional*	6	3	2	1	6	3	11
Delfin	6	2	2	2	9	8	8
Real Tomayapo	6	0	1	5	3	11	1

Enter play-offs

Group D

May 29 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 4 (Zenon 9, Cavani 14, Saracchi 19, Rojo 53)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 0

May 29 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 2 (Pochettino 20, Lucero 42)
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 1 (Rayer 90+3)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fortaleza (Q)	6	4	1	1	15	8	13
Boca Juniors*	6	3	2	1	10	6	11
Nacional Potosi	6	2	1	3	6	13	7
Sportivo Trinidense	6	1	0	5	5	9	3

Enter play-offs

Group E

May 30 – Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 0
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 1 (R. Torales 61)

May 30 – Montevideo
Danubio (Uru) 0
Rayo Zuliano (Ven) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sportivo Ameliano (Q)	6	4	1	1	9	5	13
Ath Paranaense*	6	4	0	2	17	5	12
Danubio	6	2	2	2	5	4	8
Rayo Zuliano	6	0	1	5	1	18	1

Enter play-offs

Group F

May 28 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 3 (Garro 22, Yuri Alberto 25, Coronado 58)
Racing (Uru) 0

May 28 – Buenos Aires
Argentinos Jrs (Arg) 2 (Heredia 7, Batallini 18 pen)
Nacional (Par) 1 (Arevalo 39)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Corinthians (Q)	6	4	1	1	14	2	13
Racing*	6	3	2	1	10	8	11
Argentinos Juniors	6	3	0	3	7	12	9
Nacional	6	0	1	5	6	15	1

Enter play-offs

Group G

May 29 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 0
Cuiaba (Bra) 1 (Pitta 51)

May 29 – Caracas
Metropolitanos (Ven) 1 (Flores 44)
Deportivo Garcilaso (Per) 1 (Erustes 37)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lanus (Q)	6	4	1	1	12	3	13
Cuiaba*	6	3	3	0	9	3	12
Dep Garcilaso	6	1	3	2	7	9	6
Metropolitanos	6	0	1	5	3	16	1

Enter play-offs

Group H

May 28 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 3 (A. Martinez 10, Salas 35, R. Martinez 81 pen)
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 0

May 28 – Coquimbo
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 1 (Chavez 41)
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 1 (Helinho 90+8 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing (Q)	6	5	0	1	14	3	15
RB Bragantino*	6	4	1	1	9	8	13
Coquimbo Unido	6	1	2	3	3	7	5
Sportivo Luqueno	6	0	1	5	3	11	1

Enter play-offs

Knockout Stage Draw

Play-Offs

Rosario Central (Arg) v Internacional (Bra); Barcelona SC (Ecu) v Red Bull Bragantino (Bra); Huachipato (Chi) v Racing (Uru); Cerro Porteno (Par) v Athletico Paranaense (Bra);

Libertad (Par) v Universidad Catolica (Ecu); Independiente del Valle (Ecu) v Boca Juniors (Arg); LDU (Ecu) v Always Ready (Bol); Palestino (Chi) v Cuiaba (Bra)

• *Ties take place July 16-18 and July 23-25. Teams drawn first play the first leg at home*

Round of 16

Rosario Central (Arg)/Internacional (Bra) v Fortaleza (Bra); Barcelona SC (Ecu)/Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) v Corinthians (Bra); Huachipato (Chi)/Racing (Uru) v Racing (Arg); Cerro Porteno (Par)/Athletico Paranaense (Bra) v Belgrano (Arg); Libertad (Par)/Universidad Catolica (Ecu) v Sportivo Ameliano (Par); Independiente del Valle (Ecu)/Boca Juniors (Arg) v Cruzeiro (Bra); LDU (Ecu)/Always Ready (Bol) v Lanus (Arg); Palestino (Chi)/Cuiaba (Bra) v Independiente Medellin (Col)

• *Ties take place August 13-15 and August 20-22. Teams drawn first play the first leg at home*

Final Tables 2024

COLOMBIA

Apertura First Stage

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Bucaramanga*	19	11	5	3	24	10	38
Tolima*	19	11	5	3	31	18	38
Deportivo Pereira*	19	10	4	5	28	18	34
Santa Fe*	19	10	4	5	22	12	34
La Equidad*	19	9	6	4	22	14	33
Millonarios*	19	9	4	6	28	20	31
Junior*	19	8	5	6	24	21	29
Once Caldas*	19	8	5	6	16	16	29
Independiente Medellin	19	8	5	6	22	31	29
America de Cali	19	6	7	6	22	16	25
Aguilas Doradas	19	7	4	8	20	19	25
Atletico Nacional	19	6	6	7	21	20	24
Fortaleza CEIF	19	6	6	7	18	20	24
Jaguares	19	5	7	7	17	20	22
Deportivo Cali	19	5	6	8	24	24	21
Deportivo Pasto	19	5	4	10	15	21	19
Boyaca Chico	19	5	3	11	22	35	18
Envigado	19	3	7	9	15	25	16
Alianza	19	4	4	11	15	29	16
Patriotas	19	4	3	12	8	25	15

*Advance to semi-finals

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Bucaramanga*	6	2	2	2	4	3	8
Millonarios	6	2	2	2	6	5	8
Deportivo Pereira	6	2	2	2	7	8	8
Junior	6	2	2	2	5	6	8

*Advance to final as higher seeds

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Santa Fe*	6	5	1	0	8	1	16
Tolima	6	3	1	2	9	6	10
Once Caldas	6	2	2	2	5	4	8
La Equidad	6	0	0	6	3	14	0

*Advance to final

Final

Jun 8: Atletico Bucaramanga 1-0 Santa Fe
Jun 15:
Santa Fe 3-2 Atletico Bucaramanga (agg 3-3, *Atletico Bucaramanga win 6-5 on pens*)

ECUADOR

First Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente del Valle*	15	10	5	0	23	8	35
Barcelona SC	15	9	4	2	24	8	31
LDU	15	9	3	3	27	17	30
Aucas	15	8	5	2	31	18	29
Universidad Catolica	15	7	4	4	31	20	25
Emelec	15	6	7	2	17	12	25
El Nacional	15	8	0	7	17	16	24
Mushuc Runa	15	5	3	7	18	19	18
Macara	15	4	6	5	11	13	18
Deportivo Cuenca	15	3	7	5	25	24	16
Tecnico Universitario	15	4	4	7	14	21	16
Orense	15	3	6	6	10	17	15
Cumbaya	15	4	2	9	8	19	14
Imbabura	15	3	4	8	17	29	13
Delfin	15	2	3	10	8	23	9
Libertad**	15	1	5	9	8	25	4

*Advance to final
**Deducted 4 points

PARAGUAY

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Libertad (C)	22	14	6	2	42	16	48
Cerro Porteno	22	13	6	3	40	17	45
Olimpia	22	9	9	4	28	21	36
Sportivo Luqueno	22	10	5	7	25	22	35
Club Guarani	22	8	7	7	31	25	31
2 de Mayo	22	9	4	9	28	25	31
Sol de America	22	7	5	10	26	39	26
Tacuary	22	5	8	9	26	38	23
Sportivo Ameliano	22	6	5	11	17	32	23
Nacional	22	6	4	12	24	35	22
Sportivo Trinidense	22	6	3	13	30	34	21
General Caballero (JLM)	22	3	10	9	22	35	19

PERU

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario*	17	12	4	1	32	7	40
Sporting Cristal	17	13	1	3	44	20	40
Melgar	17	12	2	3	36	19	38
Alianza Lima	17	11	0	6	32	16	33
Cusco	17	9	2	6	22	21	29
ADT	17	8	4	5	29	24	28
Cienciano	17	6	8	3	20	20	26
Comerciantes Unidos	17	6	4	7	22	31	22
Los Chankas	17	6	3	8	25	26	21
U Cesar Vallejo	17	4	8	5	19	24	20
Atletico Grau	17	4	7	6	19	17	19
Sport Boys	17	5	4	8	18	20	19
Sport Huancayo	17	5	4	8	18	29	19
UTC	17	4	4	9	21	29	16
Deportivo Garcilaso	17	3	5	9	20	26	14
Alianza Atletico	17	3	5	9	11	19	14
Carlos A Mannucci	17	3	5	9	11	34	14
Union Comercio	17	1	6	10	17	34	9

*Advance to final play-off

URUGUAY

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol*	15	13	2	0	31	7	41
Nacional	15	10	4	1	31	16	34
Defensor Sporting	15	8	4	3	31	17	28
Boston River	15	8	3	4	21	17	27
Progreso	15	7	3	5	25	25	24
Cerro Largo	15	6	3	6	16	16	21
Racing	15	5	4	6	22	22	19
Liverpool	15	4	6	5	22	24	18
Montevideo Wanderers	15	5	3	7	15	20	18
Cerro	15	4	5	6	19	25	17
Deportivo Maldonado	15	4	3	8	14	19	15
Rampla Juniors	15	4	3	8	15	27	15
River Plate	15	3	5	7	20	25	14
Danubio	15	3	5	7	13	19	14
Fenix	15	3	4	8	11	17	13
Miramar Misiones	15	2	5	8	18	28	11

*Advance to championship play-off

VENEZUELA

Apertura First Stage

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UCV*	13	6	7	0	17	8	25
Angostura*	13	7	3	3	16	13	24
Inter de Barinas*	13	7	1	5	14	12	22
Portuguesa*	13	6	3	4	17	12	21
Carabobo*	13	5	6	2	13	9	21
Metropolitanos*	13	6	3	4	19	18	21
Academia Puerto Cabello*	13	5	5	3	15	11	20
Deportivo La Guaira*	13	5	5	3	14	14	20
Deportivo Tachira	13	5	4	4	13	10	19
Monagas	13	5	4	4	19	18	19
Caracas	13	2	6	5	10	13	12
Estudiantes de Merida	13	2	2	9	14	24	8
Rayo Zuliano	13	1	4	8	16	23	7
Zamora	13	0	5	8	10	22	5

*Advance to semi-finals

Semi-Final Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Metropolitanos*	6	4	2	0	13	6	14
Deportivo La Guaira	6	3	0	3	8	8	9
UCV	6	2	2	2	9	8	8
Inter de Barinas	6	0	2	4	5	13	2

*Advance to final

Semi-Final Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Carabobo* (C)	6	3	2	1	10	5	11
Portuguesa	6	2	2	2	10	10	8
Academia Puerto Cabello	6	1	3	2	5	7	6
Angostura	6	1	3	2	9	12	6

*Advance to final

Final

Jun 2: Carabobo 3-0 Metropolitanos

CONCACAF

2024 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

Final

Jun 1 – Pachuca
Pachuca (Mex) 3 (Rondon 12, 67, E. Rodriguez 32)
Columbus Crew (USA) 0

2024 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Preliminary Round

Apr 23-24: Cavalry 1-0 Vancouver FC; Toronto FC 5-0 Simcoe County Rovers
May 1-2: Atletico Ottowa 7-0 Valour; Forge 3-1 York United; Pacific 1-1 TSS Rovers (*Pacific win 5-4 on pens*); HFX Wanderers 2-2 Saint-Laurent (*Saint-Laurent win 5-3 on pens*)

Quarter-Finals

May 7-8: Cavalry 1-2 Vancouver Whitecaps; Forge 1-1 CF Montreal; Atletico Ottowa 0-0 Pacific; Saint-Laurent 0-3 Toronto FC
May 21-22: Vancouver Whitecaps 0-1 Cavalry (agg 2-2, *Vancouver Whitecaps win on away goals*); Toronto FC 8-1 Saint-Laurent (agg 11-1); CF Montreal 1-2 Forge (agg 2-3)
May 29: Pacific 2-1 Atletico Ottowa (agg 2-1)

Final Tables 2023-24

ARUBA

Kaya 6 Play-Offs

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dakota*	10	7	3	0	29	6	24
Britannia*	10	5	2	3	18	12	17
Nacional*	10	4	4	2	19	15	16
Estrella*	10	4	1	5	15	26	13
RCA	10	3	3	4	12	7	12
River Plate	10	0	1	9	6	33	1

*Advance to Kaya 4 play-offs

Kaya 4 Play-Offs

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dakota*	3	2	1	0	9	2	7
Britannia*	3	1	2	0	4	2	5
Nacional	3	1	1	1	7	5	4
Estrella	3	0	0	3	6	17	0

*Advance to final

Final

Jun 6: Dakota 1-1 Britannia (*AET, Britannia win 5-4 on pens*)

BELIZE

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Verdes*	14	12	1	1	37	4	37
Altitude*	14	8	5	1	28	17	29
Port Layola* (C)	14	8	2	4	33	18	26
Benque*	14	8	2	4	23	12	26
Progresso	14	5	3	6	19	18	18
Police United	14	1	5	8	10	22	8
Belmopan Bandits	14	2	2	10	21	42	8
Wagiya	14	2	0	12	14	52	6

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Apr 28: Benque 0-1 Verdes; Port Layola 2-0 Altitude
May 5: Verdes 0-0 Benque (agg 1-0); Altitude 2-1 Port Layola (agg 2-3)

Final

May 12: Port Layola 0-1 Verdes
May 19: Verdes 0-1 Port Layola (agg 1-1, *Port Layola win 3-0 on pens*)

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wolues (C)	18	15	0	3	99	20	45
Islanders	18	13	2	3	70	23	41
VG United*	18	14	1	3	85	11	40
One Love United	18	8	5	5	54	41	29
Lion Heart	18	8	3	7	55	41	27
Sugar Boyz*	18	8	5	5	55	29	26
Rebels	18	7	1	10	36	60	22
Panthers	18	5	3	10	36	56	18
Positive	18	2	0	16	16	117	6
Old Madrid	18	0	0	18	12	120	0

*Deducted 3 points

COSTA RICA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Saprissa* (C)	22	14	6	2	41	18	48
Herediano*	22	13	5	4	34	17	44
Alajuelense*	22	11	8	3	37	18	41
San Carlos*	22	10	7	5	40	29	37
Municipal Liberia	22	11	4	7	36	31	37
Sporting San Jose	22	9	5	8	29	29	32
Guanacasteca	22	8	6	8	30	28	30
Perez Zeledon	22	6	5	11	19	30	23
Cartagines	22	4	8	10	21	30	20
Puntarenas	22	4	7	11	18	31	19
Municipal Grecia	22	3	6	13	18	31	15
Santos de Guapiles	22	4	3	15	19	50	15

*Advance to semi-finals

Semi-Finals

May 16-17: Alajuelense 1-0 Herediano; San Carlos 0-1 Deportivo Saprissa
May 19-20: Herediano 1-0 Alajuelense (agg 1-1, *AET, Alajuelense win 2-0 on pens*); Deportivo Saprissa 4-0 San Carlos (agg 5-0)

Final

May 23: Alajuelense 1-0 Deportivo Saprissa
May 26:
Deportivo Saprissa 3-0 Alajuelense (agg 3-1)

EL SALVADOR

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alianza* (C)	22	13	6	3	39	13	45
Firpo*	22	13	3	6	47	30	42
Municipal Limeno*	22	12	3	7	33	25	39
Aguila*	22	10	8	4	29	18	38
FAS*	22	8	8	6	26	24	32
Platense*	22	9	5	8	26	29	32
Isidro Metapan*	22	9	4	9	24	22	31
Once Deportivo*	22	8	7	7	22	24	31
Dragon	22	9	3	10	27	33	30
Santa Tecla	22	5	5	12	26	39	20
Fuerte San Francisco	22	4	5	13	19	30	17
Jocoro	22	2	3	17	13	44	9

*Advance to quarter-finals

Quarter-Finals

May 9-10: Isidro Metapan 2-0 Firpo; Once Deportivo 1-1 Alianza; Platense 0-3 Municipal Limeno; FAS 3-1 Aguila
May 12-13: Firpo 1-0 Isidro Metapan (agg 1-2); Alianza 2-0 Once Deportivo (agg 3-1); Aguila 3-1 FAS (agg 4-4, *FAS win 5-4 on pens*); Municipal Limeno 0-2 Platense (agg 3-2)

Semi-Finals

May 16: Isidro Metapan 0-2 Municipal Limeno
May 19: FAS 1-1 Alianza; Municipal Limeno 0-1 Isidro Metapan (agg 2-1)
May 22: Alianza 2-1 FAS (agg 3-2)

Final

May 26: Alianza 5-0 Municipal Limeno

GUADELOUPE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Siroco Les Abymes (C)	28	19	3	6	50	21	88
Moulien	28	18	5	5	64	24	87
Etoile de Morne-a-l'Eau	28	15	7	6	41	28	80
Gosier	28	15	6	7	48	31	79
Sporting Baie-Mahault*	28	14	6	8	36	27	75
Jeunesse Evolution*	28	10	9	9	45	39	66
Dynamo Le Moule	28	10	8	10	42	37	66

Phare du Canal**	28	13	3	12	49	49	64
La Gauloise	28	9	8	11	33	34	63
Cambrefort	28	10	5	13	46	56	63
USBM	28	9	7	12	60	56	62
Amical Club	28	9	4	15	42	47	59
Solidarite Scolaire* (R)	28	6	8	14	28	54	53
CERFA (R)	28	6	4	18	32	63	50
Juventus Sainte-Anne (R)	28	3	5	20	26	76	42

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss =1 point
**Deducted 1 point*
***Deducted 6 points*

HAITI

Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Hope*	8	5	0	3	10	5	15
Ouanaminthe*	8	4	1	3	6	6	13
Racing des Gonaives	8	3	3	2	9	8	12
Capoise	8	3	2	3	6	6	11
FICA	8	1	2	5	2	8	5

**Advance to championship round*

Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cosmopolites	8	3	3	2	5	4	12
Baltimore*	8	3	3	2	4	3	12
Tempete*	8	2	5	1	4	3	11
Triomphe Liancourt	8	2	3	3	3	5	9
Rivartibonitienne	8	2	2	4	3	4	8

**Advance to championship round*

Regular Season Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
America des Cayes*	6	4	2	0	15	3	14
Cavaly*	6	2	3	1	8	7	9
Racing Club Haitien	6	1	3	2	3	9	6
Juventus	6	0	2	4	2	9	2
Violette AC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Advance to championship round*

Championship Round Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Hope* (C)	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Tempete**	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Cavaly	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

**Advance to final*
***Advance to third place play-off*

Championship Round Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ouanaminthe*	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
America des Cayes**	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Baltimore	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

**Advance to final*
***Advance to third place play-off*

Third Place Play-Off

May 26: Tempete 0-1 America des Cayes

Final

May 26: Real Hope 1-1 Ouanaminthe
(*Real Hope win 4-2 on pens*)

HONDURAS

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Marathon*	18	11	2	5	33	18	35
Motagua*	18	9	7	2	30	15	34
Olimpia** (C)	18	9	6	3	33	14	33
Olancho**	18	7	8	3	18	11	29
Genesis**	18	7	6	5	12	15	27
Real Espana**	18	6	6	6	24	22	24
Real Sociedad	18	7	0	11	23	32	21
Victoria	18	5	5	8	16	24	20
UPNFM	18	4	3	11	11	24	15
Vida	18	3	1	14	16	41	10

**Advance to semi-finals*
***Advance to play-offs*

Play-Offs

May 2-3: Real Espana 1-0 Olimpia; Genesis 1-0 Olancho
May 5: Olimpia 3-1 Real Espana (agg 3-2); Olancho 0-0 Genesis (agg 0-1)

Semi-Finals

May 9: Olimpia 3-3 Motagua; Genesis 0-2 Marathon
May 11-12: Motagua 3-4 Olimpia (agg 6-7); Marathon 1-0 Genesis (agg 3-0)

Final

May 20: Olimpia 3-1 Marathon
May 25: Marathon 2-2 Olimpia (agg 3-5)

MEXICO

Clausura Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
America*	17	10	5	2	30	12	35
Cruz Azul*	17	10	3	4	23	14	33
Toluca*	17	9	5	3	38	23	32
Monterrey*	17	9	5	3	32	19	32
Tigres UANL*	17	9	4	4	34	23	31
Guadalajara*	17	9	4	4	24	17	31
Pachuca**	17	9	2	6	34	27	29
Pumas UNAM**	17	7	6	4	27	22	27
Necaxa**	17	7	6	4	30	29	27
Queretaro**	17	6	6	5	22	21	24
Leon	17	7	3	7	23	25	24
Juarez	17	4	4	9	19	26	16
Atletico San Luis	17	5	1	11	25	35	16
Mazatan	17	4	4	9	21	32	16
Santos Laguna	17	4	3	10	15	28	15
Tijuana	17	2	8	7	21	30	14
Atlas	17	3	5	9	21	31	14
Puebla	17	1	2	14	18	43	5

**Advance to quarter-finals*
**Advance to reclassification*

Reclassification Serie A

May 2: Pachuca 0-0 Pumas UNAM
(*Pumas UNAM win 5-3 on pens*)

Reclassification Serie B

May 2: Nexaca 1-1 Queretaro
(*Necaxa win 3-2 on pens*)

Reclassification Play-Off

May 5: Pachuca 2-1 Necaxa

Quarter-Finals

May 8-9: Pachuca 1-1 America; Guadalajara 1-0 Toluca; Pumas UNAM 0-2 Cruz Azul; Tigres UANL 1-2 Monterrey
May 11-12: America 1-1 Pachuca (agg 2-2, *America advance as higher seeds*); Toluca 0-0 Guadalajara (agg 0-1); Cruz Azul 2-2 Pumas UNAM (agg 4-2); Monterrey 1-1 Tigres UANL (agg 3-2)

Semi-Finals

May 15-16: Guadalajara 0-0 America; Monterrey 0-1 Cruz Azul
May 18-19: America 1-0 Guadalajara (agg 1-0); Cruz Azul 1-2 Monterrey (agg 2-2, *Cruz Azul advance as higher seeds*)

Final

May 23: Cruz Azul 1-1 America
May 26: America 1-0 Cruz Azul (agg 2-1)

PANAMA

Apertura East

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo del Este*	16	8	5	3	22	16	29
Tauro** (C)	16	8	4	4	21	11	28
Plaza Amador**	16	8	2	6	21	17	26
Alianza	16	6	5	5	17	19	23
Sporting San Miguelito	16	5	5	6	16	19	20
Arabe Unido	16	2	4	10	13	27	10

**Advance to semi-finals*
***Advance to play-offs*

Apertura West

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
San Francisco*	16	9	4	3	18	14	31
Herrera**	16	7	4	5	28	23	25
Independiente**	16	7	3	6	24	16	24
UMECIT	16	5	6	5	14	15	21
Universitario	16	3	7	6	18	24	16
Veraguas United	16	2	3	11	20	31	9

**Advance to semi-finals*
***Advance to play-offs*

Play-Offs

May 11-12: Tauro 4-1 Independiente; Herrera 1-2 Plaza Amador

Semi-Finals

May 18-19: Tauro 2-1 San Francisco; Plaza Amador 1-1 Deportivo del Este
May 25-26: San Francisco 0-0 Tauro (agg 1-2); Deportivo del Este 0-1 Plaza Amador (agg 1-2)

Final

Jun 2: Tauro 2-0 Plaza Amador

PUERTO RICO

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academia Quintana* (C)	7	6	1	0	20	3	19
Metropolitan*	7	5	2	0	27	4	17
PR Sol*	7	4	0	3	16	18	12
PR Surf*	7	3	1	3	21	17	10
Bayamon	7	3	1	3	17	13	10
Caguas Sporting	7	3	1	3	20	17	10
Mayaguez	7	1	0	6	5	20	3
Guaynabo	7	0	0	7	3	37	0

**Advance to semi-finals*

Semi-Finals

May 22-23: Metropolitan 1-0 PR Sol; Academia Quintana 3-0 PR Surf

Final

May 26: Academia Quintana 2-1 Metropolitan

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
AC Port of Spain (C)	20	13	5	2	49	21	44
Police	20	12	6	2	43	20	42
Defence Force	20	12	4	4	40	20	40
Club Sando	20	10	5	5	34	25	35
La Horquetta Rangers	20	8	4	8	39	38	28
Phoenix	20	8	3	9	33	37	27
Morvant Caledonia Utd	20	6	6	8	32	27	24
Point Fortin Civic	20	6	5	9	26	30	23
Prison Service	20	7	1	12	25	37	22
Eagles	20	5	5	10	24	35	20
Central	20	0	2	18	13	68	2

TURKS & CAICOS

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academy Eagles (C)	6	5	1	0	18	4	16
SWA Sharks	6	4	0	2	18	9	12
Teachers	6	0	3	3	3	15	3
Cheshire Hall	6	0	2	4	2	13	2
Flamingo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

ASIA

Final Tables 2023-24

AUSTRALIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Central Coast Mariners* (C)	27	17	4	6	49	27	55
Wellington Phoenix*	27	15	8	4	42	26	53
Melbourne Victory**	27	10	12	5	43	33	42
Sydney FC**	27	12	5	10	52	41	41
Macarthur**	27	11	8	8	45	48	41
Melbourne City**	27	11	6	10	50	38	39
Western Sydney Wanderers	27	11	4	12	44	48	37
Adelaide United	27	9	5	13	52	53	32
Brisbane Roar	27	8	6	13	42	55	30
Newcastle Jets	27	6	10	11	39	47	28
Western United	27	7	5	15	36	55	26
Perth Glory	27	5	7	15	46	69	22

**Advance to semi-finals*
**Advance to elimination finals*

Elimination Finals

May 4-5: Sydney FC 4-0 Macarthur; Melbourne Victory 1-1 Melbourne City
(*AET, Melbourne Victory win 3-2 on pens*)

Semi-Finals

May 10-12:
Sydney FC 1-2 Central Coast Mariners; Melbourne Victory 0-0 Wellington Phoenix
May 18:
Central Coast Mariners 0-0 Sydney FC (agg 2-1); Wellington 1-2 Melbourne Victory (*AET*, agg 1-2)

Grand Final

May 25:
Central Coast Mariners 3-1 Melbourne Victory (*AET*)

BANGLADESH

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bashundhara Kings (C)	18	14	3	1	49	13	45
Mohammedan Dhaka	18	9	8	1	40	17	35
Abahani Dhaka	18	9	5	4	34	22	32
Bangladesh Police	18	7	5	6	23	19	26
Fortis	18	6	6	6	21	23	24
Sheikh Russel	18	4	7	7	20	24	19
Abahani Chittagong	18	4	7	7	22	29	19
Sheikh Jamal	18	4	5	9	14	24	17
Rahmatgonj MFS (R)	18	2	10	6	19	26	16
Brothers Union (R)	18	1	4	13	21	66	7

HONG KONG

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lee Man (C)	20	17	3	0	63	16	54
Tai Po	20	14	4	2	41	12	46
Eastern	20	14	4	2	47	11	46
Kitchee	20	14	3	3	60	15	45
Southern District	20	10	4	6	38	18	34
BC Rangers	20	8	0	12	41	34	24
HKFC	20	5	3	12	16	49	18
North District	20	5	3	12	27	43	18
Sham Shui Po	20	3	3	14	18	52	12
HK U23	20	2	3	15	12	71	9
Resources Capital	20	1	4	15	13	55	7

INDONESIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Borneo*	34	21	7	6	53	31	70
Persib* (C)	34	16	14	4	65	38	62
Bali United*	34	17	7	10	55	43	58
Madura United*	34	15	10	9	58	45	55
Dewa United	34	14	12	8	59	48	54
PSIS Semarang	34	15	8	11	49	41	53
Persis Solo	34	14	8	12	50	47	50
Persija	34	12	12	10	49	41	48
Persik Kediri	34	13	9	12	58	55	48
Barito Putera	34	11	13	10	51	48	46
PSM	34	11	11	12	44	39	44
Persebaya Surabaya	34	10	12	12	33	46	42
PSS Sleman	34	9	12	13	49	53	39
Persita	34	10	9	15	44	63	39
Arema	34	10	8	16	42	60	38
RANS Nusantara (R)	34	8	11	15	36	52	35
Bhayangkara (R)	34	5	11	18	42	57	26
Persikabo 1973 (R)	34	4	8	22	44	74	20

**Advance to semi-finals*

Semi-Finals

May 14-15: Bali United 1-1 Persib; Madura United 1-0 Borneo
May 18-19: Persib 3-0 Bali United (agg 4-1); Borneo 2-3 Madura United (agg 2-4)

Third Place Play-Off

May 25: Bali United 0-0 Borneo
May 30: Borneo 4-2 Bali United (agg 4-2)

Final

May 26: Persib 3-0 Madura United
May 31: Madura United 1-3 Persib (agg 1-6)

IRAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Persepolis (C)	30	20	8	2	45	18	68
Esteghlal	30	19	10	1	40	15	67
Sepahan	30	17	6	7	53	26	57
Tractor	30	16	6	8	42	22	54
Shams Azar Qazvin	30	11	9	10	35	35	42
Zob Ahan	30	11	9	10	30	30	42
Malavan	30	10	11	9	31	26	41
Aluminium Arak	30	10	9	11	27	33	39
Gol Gohar	30	8	12	10	30	28	36
Mes Rafsanjan	30	8	11	11	32	37	35
Nassaji Mazandaran	30	7	8	15	27	36	29
Havadar	30	6	11	13	31	48	29
Foolad	30	7	8	15	20	40	29
Esteghlal Khuzestan	30	6	10	14	31	42	28
Paykan (R)	30	4	15	11	25	38	27
Sanat Naft (R)	30	4	9	17	24	49	21

JORDAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hussein (C)	22	19	2	1	45	6	59
Al Faisaly	22	18	3	1	63	14	57
Al Wehdat	22	14	6	2	38	14	48
Al Ramtha	22	11	2	9	30	22	35
Al Salt	22	9	1	12	25	27	28
Ma'an	22	7	5	10	22	30	26
Shabab Al Aqaba	22	6	7	9	19	38	25
Shabab Al Ordon	22	7	1	14	21	36	22
Moghayer Al Sarhan	22	6	3	13	21	38	21
Al Ahli	22	5	5	12	17	32	20
Sahab (R)	22	4	6	12	22	42	18
Al Jalil (R)	22	1	9	12	11	35	12

KUWAIT

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kuwait SC	18	13	4	1	46	17	43
Al Arabi	18	13	3	2	47	18	42
Al Qadsia	18	11	6	1	34	10	39
Al Salmiyah	18	6	6	6	21	24	24
Al Nasar	18	7	3	8	31	27	24
Al Fahaheel	18	6	5	7	25	27	23
Kazma	18	5	5	8	20	32	20
Al Shabab	18	4	2	12	14	43	14
Khaitan	18	2	6	10	11	31	12
Al Jahra	18	2	2	14	17	37	8

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom four enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kuwait SC (C)	28	21	6	1	72	21	69
Al Arabi	28	17	8	3	62	27	59
Al Qadsia	28	15	9	4	51	25	54
Al Salmiyah	28	9	9	10	35	41	36
Al Fahaheel	28	8	9	11	37	44	33
Al Nasar	28	7	4	17	42	60	25

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kazma	24	10	5	9	38	39	35
Khaitan	24	5	6	13	17	39	21
Al Shabab (R)	24	6	2	16	18	50	20
Al Jahra (R)	24	4	2	18	28	54	14

OMAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Seeb (C)	22	18	3	1	40	9	57
Al Nahda	22	12	7	3	38	21	43
Oman Club	22	13	3	6	34	24	42
Sohar	22	10	7	5	32	21	37
Al Nasr	22	9	5	8	28	25	32
Al Rustaq	22	8	8	6	25	25	32
Al Shabab	22	5	9	8	22	26	24
Sur	22	6	6	10	29	34	24
Ibri	22	7	3	12	21	27	24
Dhofar	22	6	2	14	23	36	20
Bahla	22	4	6	12	12	25	18
Al Wehda (R)	22	4	1	17	16	47	13

SAUDI ARABIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal (C)	34	31	3	0	101	23	96
Al Nassr	34	26	4	4	100	42	82
Al Ahli	34	19	8	7	67	35	65
Al Taawoun	34	16	11	7	51	35	59
Al Ittihad	34	16	6	12	63	54	54
Ettifaq	34	12	12	10	43	34	48
Al Fateh	34	12	9	13	57	55	45
Al Shabab	34	12	8	14	45	42	44
Al Fayha	34	11	11	12	44	52	44
Damak	34	10	11	13	44	45	41
Al Khaleej	34	9	10	15	36	47	37
Al Raed	34	9	10	15	41	49	37
Al Wehda	34	10	6	18	45	60	36
Al Riyadh	34	8	11	15	33	57	35
Al Akhdoud	34	9	6	19	33	52	33
Abha (R)	34	9	5	20	38	87	32
Al Tai (R)	34	8	7	19	34	64	31
Al Hazm (R)	34	4	12	18	34	76	24

THAILAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Buriram United (C)	30	20	9	1	70	27	69
Bangkok United	30	17	10	3	58	24	61
Port	30	16	9	5	72	37	57
BG Pathum United	30	15	9	6	59	38	54
Muangthong United	30	16	4	10	64	45	52
Ratchaburi	30	11	6	13	39	35	39
Uthai Thani	30	9	8	13	39	55	35
Khonkaen United	30	8	11	11	44	58	35
Lamphun Warriors	30	9	8	13	45	47	35
Prachuap	30	8	10	12	33	39	34
Chiangrai United	30	8	10	12	31	35	34
Nakhon Pathom Utd	30	8	9	13	37	53	33
Sukhothai	30	9	5	16	34	60	32
Chonburi (R)	30	7	9	14	33	52	30
Police Tero (R)	30	7	7	16	38	67	28
Trat (R)	30	6	8	16	40	64	26

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Wasl (C)	26	21	4	1	70	27	67
Shabab Al Ahli	26	18	4	4	73	34	58
Al Ain	26	14	3	9	54	37	45
Sharjah	26	10	12	4	53	40	42
Al Wahda	26	12	6	8	45	34	42
Al Nasr	26	11	6	9	39	36	39
Al Bataeh	26	10	7	9	42	44	37
Al Jazira	26	9	8	9	50	47	35
Ajman	26	8	10	8	39	47	34
Bani Yas	26	7	5	14	33	46	26
Kalba	26	6	8	12	39	50	26
Khorfakkan	26	6	5	15	34	55	23
Emirates (R)	26	4	5	17	32	60	17
Hatta (R)	26	1	7	18	20	66	10

AFRICA

Final Tables 2023-24

ALGERIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
MC Alger (C)	30	19	8	3	55	20	65
Belouizdad	30	15	8	7	37	20	53
CS Constantine	30	15	8	7	46	30	53
USM Alger	30	15	4	11	40	32	49
ES Setif	30	14	6	10	37	37	48
Paradou AC	30	11	9	10	36	22	42
JS Kabylie	30	10	12	8	33	27	42
ASO Chlef	30	11	8	11	41	40	41
Saoura	30	11	7	12	34	37	40
Khenchela	30	11	6	13	33	39	39
NC Magra	30	9	11	10	30	32	38
El Bayadh	30	10	8	12	29	30	38
US Biskra	30	9	9	12	25	34	36
MC Oran	30	9	9	12	26	33	36
Ben Aknoun (R)	30	8	8	14	32	37	32
US Souf (R)	30	2	1	27	22	86	7

ANGOLA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Petro Atletico (C)	28	20	7	1	58	11	67
Sagrada Esperanca	28	18	7	3	45	15	61
Desportivo Lunda-Sul	28	13	11	4	35	19	50
Kabuscorp	28	12	8	8	36	27	44
Wiliete	28	10	11	7	31	24	41
Desportivo Huila	28	11	8	9	24	25	41
1º de Agosto	28	8	14	6	32	24	38
Bravos do Maquis	28	11	4	13	29	28	37
Interclube	28	9	8	11	25	29	35
Academica do Lobito	28	7	11	10	16	26	32
Sao Salvador	28	7	10	11	23	34	31
Santa Rita	28	7	5	16	22	40	26
Recreativo do Libolo	28	6	7	15	19	32	25
Uniao de Malanje (R)	28	5	6	17	21	46	21
Sporting de Cabinda (R)	28	5	5	18	27	63	20

BOTSWANA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jwaneng Galaxy (C)	30	20	5	5	45	17	65
Township Rollers	30	19	7	4	52	16	64
Gaborone United	30	19	6	5	50	20	63
Security Systems	30	13	5	12	39	40	44
TAFIC	30	10	8	12	32	37	38
VTM	30	10	7	13	31	33	37
Sua Flamingoes	30	10	6	14	36	32	36
BDF XI	30	8	12	10	21	23	36
Masitaoka	30	9	9	12	25	29	36
Orapa United	30	7	11	12	27	27	32
Matebele	30	7	11	12	32	36	32
Nico United	30	7	11	12	27	33	32
Morupule Wanderers (R)	30	7	9	14	35	44	30
Eleven Angels (R)	30	5	10	15	28	44	25
Police XI (R)	30	5	9	16	23	42	24
Holy Ghost (R)	30	5	8	17	20	50	23

BURKINA FASO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Douanes (C)	30	17	9	4	42	14	60
Majestic	30	15	9	6	36	21	54
SONABEL	30	13	13	4	28	16	52
Sporting Cascades	30	12	11	7	31	25	47
Salitas	30	12	10	8	41	36	46
EF Ouagadougou	30	10	11	9	28	29	41
Rahimo	30	10	9	11	28	30	39
ASEC-K	30	8	14	8	17	18	38
ASFA-Yennenga	30	7	14	9	24	26	35
Vitesse	30	8	11	11	22	26	35
RCK	30	7	13	10	15	22	34
ASFB	30	6	15	9	18	23	33
USFA	30	6	14	10	21	28	32
RC Bobo-Dioulasso	30	5	15	10	23	31	30
Royal (R)	30	3	16	11	23	31	25
KOZAF (R)	30	5	8	17	18	39	23

CAMEROON

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Victoria United (C)	7	4	1	2	11	8	13
Cotonsport	7	2	4	1	7	5	10
Stade Renard	7	2	4	1	7	6	10
Colombe	7	2	3	2	5	4	9
Young Sport Academy*	7	3	2	2	7	6	8
Canon	7	2	2	3	4	8	8
Gazelle	7	2	2	3	4	5	8
Dynamo de Douala	7	0	4	3	4	7	4

*Deducted 3 points

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Union Douala	10	5	4	1	8	4	19
Fortuna Mfou	10	5	3	2	17	14	18
Les Astres	10	5	1	4	19	14	16
Bamboutos	10	3	6	1	10	8	15
PWD	10	3	6	1	10	9	15
Fauve Azur Elite (R)	10	4	3	3	9	8	15
APEJES Academy (R)	10	4	2	4	10	10	14
UMS de Loum (R)	10	2	4	4	13	14	10
Aigle Royal (R)	10	2	4	4	12	15	10
Avion Academy (R)	10	2	2	6	9	15	8
Fovu Club (R)	10	1	3	6	12	18	6

DJIBOUTI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arta/Solar 7 (C)	18	13	4	1	55	13	43
ASAS	18	11	5	2	44	16	38
Port	18	9	3	6	34	18	30
Dikhil	18	7	5	6	32	22	26
SDC Group/H Balbala	18	7	5	6	19	25	26
Gendarmerie	18	7	4	7	33	25	25
Garde-Cotes	18	6	5	7	20	19	23
GR/SIAF	18	6	3	9	23	25	21
Academie CS/CNSS (R)	18	4	5	9	26	43	17
CDC Q7 (R)	18	0	1	17	6	86	1

DR CONGO

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
TP Mazembe (C)	14	12	1	1	39	5	37
Maniema Union	14	10	2	2	27	8	32
Saint Eloi Lupopo	14	6	6	2	20	13	24
Aigles du Congo	14	5	5	4	18	20	20
Vita Club	14	4	7	3	13	10	19
Dauphins Noirs	14	3	1	10	9	30	10
Don Bosco	14	2	2	10	8	23	8
Lubumbashi Sport	14	1	2	11	7	32	5

Relegation Round Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Simba	5	3	2	0	5	0	11
Blessing	5	3	2	0	6	2	11
Tshinkunku	5	2	2	1	10	7	8
Groupe Bazano (R)	5	2	1	2	6	7	7
Sanga Balende (R)	5	1	1	3	5	8	4
Panda B52 (R)	5	0	0	5	6	14	0

Relegation Round Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Motema Pembe	5	3	1	1	7	3	10
Rangers	5	3	1	1	5	1	10
Kuya Sport	5	3	0	2	6	3	9
Etoile de Kivu (R)	5	3	0	2	5	7	9
OC Renaissance (R)	5	1	1	3	4	8	4
Celeste (R)	5	0	1	4	1	6	1

ESWATINI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mbabane Swallows (C)	26	15	10	1	44	20	55
Green Mamba	26	15	5	6	56	22	50
Nsingizini Hotspurs	26	12	12	2	27	17	48
Young Buffaloes	26	14	4	8	50	26	46
Royal Leopards	26	12	10	4	38	27	46
Highlanders	26	10	8	8	36	36	38
Illovo	26	8	10	8	23	27	34
Madlenya	26	6	9	11	21	39	27
Rangers	26	6	8	12	24	29	26
Ezulwini United	26	5	10	11	19	28	25
Manzini Sea Birds	26	5	10	11	25	43	25
Moneni Pirates	26	3	13	10	27	34	22
Denver (R)	26	5	6	15	18	36	21
Manzini Wanderers (R)	26	4	9	13	27	51	21

GHANA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Samartex (C)	34	19	4	11	45	28	61
Accra Lions	34	14	9	11	37	36	51
Berekum Chelsea	34	15	6	13	37	41	51
Aduana Stars	34	16	2	16	43	36	50
Nsoatreman	34	14	8	12	33	29	50
Asante Kotoko	34	14	7	13	35	29	49
Nations	34	14	7	13	32	28	49
Medeama	34	14	7	13	27	26	49
Dreams	34	13	9	12	44	35	48
Bechem United	34	12	12	10	41	34	48
Bibiani Gold Stars	34	12	11	11	41	40	47
Karela United	34	12	10	12	36	42	46
Heart of Lions	34	11	12	11	34	29	45
Hearts of Oak	34	11	12	11	35	31	45
Legon Cities	34	13	6	15	29	38	45
Great Olympics (R)	34	11	11	12	27	27	44
Bofoakwe Tano (R)	34	6	15	13	21	36	33
RTU (R)	34	9	4	21	31	63	31

IVORY COAST

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
San-Pedro (C)	30	17	5	8	47	29	56
Stade d'Abidjan	30	14	9	7	41	24	51
Racing d'Abidjan	29	14	9	6	41	24	51
ASEC Abidjan	30	14	8	8	31	15	50
Stella	30	13	6	11	39	29	45
Zoman	30	11	10	9	29	27	43
AFAD	30	11	9	10	29	27	42
SOA	30	11	9	10	33	32	42
SOL	30	10	10	10	32	31	40
Korhogo	30	10	10	10	31	31	40
Lys Sassandra	30	9	9	12	32	32	36
Denguele	30	9	9	12	31	47	36
Mouna	30	8	8	14	26	43	32
Bouake	29	7	9	13	27	40	30
Sporting Gagnoa (R)	30	6	10	14	20	38	28
Indenie Abengourou (R)	30	6	8	16	27	47	26

LESOTHO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lioli (C)	30	20	8	2	49	14	68
Matlama	30	19	9	2	52	17	66
Bantu	30	16	9	5	58	22	57
LMPS	30	15	10	5	36	16	55
Linare	30	15	10	5	34	19	55
LCS	30	15	8	7	40	25	53
LDF	30	13	9	8	41	26	48
Lifofane	30	12	10	8	31	31	46
Lijabatho	30	10	13	7	31	24	43
Liphakoe	30	9	8	13	31	36	35
Likila United	30	7	10	13	25	29	31
Machokha	30	4	12	14	29	45	24
CCX	30	5	4	21	15	55	19
Manonyane	30	3	10	17	11	34	19
ACE Maseru (R)	30	3	10	17	19	53	19
Naughty Boys (R)	30	2	4	24	19	75	10

MALI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Djoliba (C)	30	22	3	5	48	18	69
Stade Malien Bamako	30	16	10	4	42	17	58
Real Bamako	30	14	9	7	38	26	51
Bakaridjan	30	12	11	7	42	27	47
US Bougouba	30	14	5	11	36	26	47
Afrique Football Elite	30	11	9	10	29	27	42
ASKO	30	10	11	9	23	24	41
Binga	30	10	10	10	25	27	40
USFAS Bamako	30	10	9	11	29	30	39
Bougouni	30	8	14	8	28	29	38
Onze Createurs	30	10	8	12	34	36	38
Police	30	9	8	13	26	34	35
Koro	30	7	9	14	26	39	30
COB	30	8	5	17	27	47	29
USC Kita (R)	30	4	12	14	20	39	24
Black Stars (R)	30	4	9	17	26	53	21

MAURITANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nouadhibou (C)	26	21	3	2	48	14	66
AS Douanes	26	17	8	1	55	18	59
Tevragh-Zeine	26	15	7	4	43	15	52
Gendrim	26	11	7	8	25	24	40
Nouakchott King's	26	9	9	8	39	32	36
Inter Nouakchott	26	8	7	11	29	34	31
Pompiers	26	8	6	12	28	38	30
Kaedi	26	7	8	11	31	41	29
Chemal	26	6	10	10	26	27	28
Garde Nationale	26	6	10	10	24	32	28
SNIM	26	5	11	10	21	32	26
Ksar	26	6	8	12	17	33	26
Concorde (R)	26	6	6	14	18	32	24
AS Entou (R)	26	3	8	15	28	59	17

MOROCCO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Raja (R)	30	21	9	0	52	15	72
FAR Rabat	30	22	5	3	65	22	71
RS Berkane	30	14	10	6	38	23	52
UTS Rabat	30	12	8	10	36	33	44
Olympic Safi	30	11	11	8	29	26	44
Wydad	30	12	8	10	31	27	44
FUS Rabat	30	11	10	9	32	28	43
Renaissance Zemamra	30	11	7	12	35	35	40
Moghreb Tetouan	30	7	14	9	27	28	35
Hassania Agadir	30	8	11	11	35	43	35
Maghreb Fes	30	8	10	12	34	35	34
Ittihad Tanger	30	7	12	11	29	38	33
JS Soualem*	30	8	6	16	31	46	27
Chabab Mohammedia	30	6	7	17	19	401	25
Mouloudia Oujda (R)	30	5	10	15	20	46	25
Youssoufia Berrechid (R)	30	4	8	18	21	49	20

*Deducted 3 points

SENEGAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Teungueth (C)	26	14	8	4	31	18	50
Jaraaf	26	11	12	3	28	13	45
DSC	26	10	11	5	29	15	41
Guediawaye	26	9	13	4	27	23	40
Pikine	26	9	11	6	20	14	38
Sonacos	26	7	12	7	16	16	33
Goree	26	7	11	8	15	17	32
Jamono Fatick	26	8	7	11	25	25	31
La Linguere	26	6	13	7	13	17	31
Ouakam	26	7	9	10	22	25	30
Generation Foot	26	6	11	9	15	24	29
Casa Sport	26	7	6	13	18	29	27
Stade de Mbour (R)	26	4	13	9	18	23	25
Diambars (R)	26	4	9	13	25	43	21

SOUTH AFRICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi Sundowns (C)	30	22	7	1	52	11	73
Orlando Pirates	30	14	8	8	44	26	50
Stellenbosch	30	14	8	8	39	24	50
Sekhukhune United	30	12	9	9	31	24	45
Cape Town City	30	12	9	9	32	26	45
TS Galaxy	30	12	8	10	31	25	44
SuperSport United	30	11	11	8	35	33	44
Polokwane City	30	9	12	9	21	27	39
Golden Arrows	30	10	8	12	33	44	38
Kaizer Chiefs	30	9	9	12	25	30	36
AmaZulu	30	8	12	10	24	30	36
Chippa United	30	8	10	12	26	29	34
Royal AM	30	9	6	15	24	43	33
Moroka Swallows	30	8	8	14	24	36	32
Richards Bay*	30	8	6	16	24	37	30
Cape Town Spurs (R)	30	6	5	19	23	43	23

*Enter promotion-relegation play-offs

TANZANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Young Africans (C)	30	26	2	2	71	14	80
Azam	30	21	6	3	63	21	69
Simba	30	21	6	3	59	25	69
Coastal Union	30	11	10	9	22	19	43
KMC	30	8	13	9	27	39	37
Namungo	30	8	12	10	27	29	36
Ihefu	30	9	9	12	29	36	36
Mashujaa	30	9	8	13	30	33	35
Tanzania Prisons	30	7	13	10	29	35	34
Kagera Sugar	30	7	13	10	23	32	34
Singida Big Stars	30	8	9	13	29	39	33
Dodoma Jiji	30	8	9	13	19	32	33
JKT Tanzania*	30	6	14	10	21	30	32
Tabora United*	30	5	12	13	20	41	27
Geita Gold (R)	30	5	10	15	18	38	25
Mtibwa Sugar (R)	30	5	6	19	30	54	21

*Enter promotion-relegation play-offs

UGANDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
SC Villa (C)	29	16	9	4	40	21	57
BUL	29	16	8	5	36	17	56
Vipers	29	16	8	5	45	20	56
Kitara	29	16	6	7	46	24	54
KCCA	29	15	4	10	54	33	49
NEC	29	14	6	9	35	34	48
Maroons	29	10	11	8	35	26	41
URA	29	10	10	9	30	27	40
Bright Stars	29	7	15	7	33	33	36
Mbarara City	29	6	14	9	22	29	32
Wakiso Giants	29	9	5	15	27	42	32
Express	29	9	5	15	36	38	32
UPDF	29	7	6	16	23	39	27
Busoga United	29	6	7	16	25	53	25
Gaddafi (R)	29	7	4	18	24	54	25
Arua Hill (R)	15	1	2	12	12	33	5

ZAMBIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Red Arrows (C)	34	21	8	5	45	16	71
ZESCO United	34	15	14	5	46	30	59
Power Dynamos	34	14	14	6	43	24	56
Maestro United Zambia	34	14	11	9	38	30	53
Kabwe Warriors	34	14	10	10	33	26	52
Nkwazi	34	14	10	10	33	35	52
Mufulira Wanderers	34	11	10	13	32	32	43
Zanaco	34	9	16	9	27	30	43
Nkana	34	11	10	13	24	30	43
Forest Rangers	34	9	15	10	33	34	42
Green Buffaloes	34	10	12	12	31	35	42
Green Eagles	34	11	9	14	35	41	42
Mutondo Stars	34	11	7	16	30	33	40
NAPSA Stars	34	9	13	12	26	30	40
Konkola Blades (R)	34	8	15	11	23	31	39
Prison Leopards (R)	34	8	11	15	26	37	35
Kansanshi Dynamos (R)	34	8	11	15	23	36	35
Trident (R)	34	4	14	16	26	44	26

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

First Round

Group A

Jun 5 – ElJadida
Sierra Leone 2 (Davies 12, Kargbo 51)
Djibouti 1 (Dadzie 35 pen)

Jun 6 – Cairo
Egypt 2 (Trezeguet 3, 8)
Burkina Faso 1 (L. Traore 57)

Jun 6 – Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 0
Ethiopia 0

Jun 9 – ElJadida
Djibouti 1 (Dadzie 29)
Ethiopia 1 (Wondimu 31)

Jun 10– Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Balde 42)
Egypt 1 (Salah 70)

Jun 10 – Bamako
Burkina Faso 2 (Ouattara 41, L. Traore 45+2 pen)
Sierra Leone 2 (Kargbo 58, Bakayoko 88)

Group B

Jun 5 – Lome
Togo 1 (Narey 61)
South Sudan 1 (Aholou 68 og)

Jun 6 – Nouakchott
Mauritania 0
Sudan 2 (Teiri 15, Abeid 29 og)

Jun 6 – Diamniadio
Senegal 1 (I. Sarr 45+1)
DR Congo 1 (Mayele 85)

Jun 9 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 1 (Elia 6)
Togo 0

Jun 11 – Nouakchott
Mauritania 0
Senegal 1 (Diallo 27)

Jun 11 – Juba
South Sudan 0
Sudan 3 (Khedr 45+3, Muzmel 51, Al Gharbal 78)

Group C

Jun 6 – Abidjan
Benin 1 (Dokou 37)
Rwanda 0

Jun 7 – Johannesburg
Zimbabwe 0
Lesotho 2 (Rasethuntsa 21, Thabantso 31)

Jun 7 – Uyo
Nigeria 1 (Dele-Bashiru 46)
South Africa 1 (Zwane 29)

Jun 10 – Abidjan
Benin 2 (J. Dossou 37, Mounie 45+3)
Nigeria 1 (Onyedika 27)

Jun 11 – Bloemfontein
South Africa 3 (Rayners 1, Morena 55, 76)
Zimbabwe 1 (Chirewa 2)

Jun 11 – Durban
Lesotho 0
Rwanda 1 (Kwizera 67)

Group D

Jun 6 – Benghazi
Libya 2 (Al Badri 20 pen, Krawa'a 40)
Mauritius 1 (Bru 34)

Jun 7 – Luanda
Angola 1 (Mabululu 2)
Eswatini 0

Jun 8 – Yaounde
Cameroon 4 (Ngadeu-Ngadjui 13, Aboubakar 25, 44 pen, Tolo 54)
Cape Verde 1 (Monteiro 37)

Jun 11 – Praia
Cape Verde 1 (Diney 10)
Libya 0

Jun 11 – Luanda
Angola 1 (Ngadeu-Ngadjui 54 og)
Cameroon 1 (Mbeumo 11)

Jun 11 – Saint Pierre
Mauritius 2 (Gaspard 19, Rose 45)
Eswatini 1 (Magagula 66)

Group E

Jun 7 – Agadir
Morocco 2 (Ziyech 6 pen, Ben Seghir 67)
Zambia 1 (Chilufya 80)

Jun 11 – Ndola
Zambia 0
Tanzania 1 (Waziri 5)

Jun 11 – Agadir
Congo 0
Morocco 6 (Ounahi 8, Riad 16, El Kaabi 30, 39, 53, Rahimi 62)

Group F

Jun 7 – Lilongwe
Kenya 1 (Abuya 72)
Burundi 1 (Abdallah 85)

Jun 7 – Korhogo
Ivory Coast 1 (S. Fofana 36)
Gabon 0

Jun 8 – Berkane
Gambia 5 (Badamosi 10, 66, Barrow 52 pen, Minteh 55, Sidibeh 78)
Seychelles 1 (Henriette 14)

Jun 11 – Franceville
Gabon 3 (Allevinah 52, Aubameyang 70, Bouanga 71)
Gambia 2 (Minteh 33, Adams 76)

Jun 11 – Lilongwe
Kenya 0
Ivory Coast 0

Jun 11 – Berkane
Seychelles 1 (Hoareau 78)
Burundi 3 (Abdallah 34, Kanakimana 62, 69)

Group G

Jun 6 – Algiers
Algeria 1 (Balde 52 og)
Guinea 2 (M. Sylla 50, A. Camara 63)

Jun 7 – Maputo
Mozambique 2 (Amade 14, Ratifo 29)
Somalia 1 (Shirwa 66)

Jun 7 – Kampala
Uganda 1 (Shaban 74)
Botswana 0

Jun 10 – ElJadida
Guinea 0
Mozambique 1 (Catamo 90+3 pen)

Jun 10 – Kampala
Uganda 1 (Mutyaba 10)
Algeria 2 (Aouar 46, Benrahma 58)

Jun 10 – Maputo
Somalia 1 (Hassan 74)
Botswana 3 (Sesinyi 10, Gaolaolwe 53, Seakanyeng 72)

Group H

Jun 5 – Johannesburg
Namibia 1 (Karuuombe 8)
Liberia 1 (Sackor 65)

Jun 5 – Tunis
Tunisia 1 (Ben Romdhane 82 pen)
Equatorial Guinea 0

Jun 6 – Lilongwe
Malawi 3 (Kawonga 6, Nkhoma 14, Mphasi 78)
Sao Tome & Principe 1 (Silva 67)

Jun 9 – Johannesburg
Namibia 0
Tunisia 0

Jun 9 – Oujda
Sao Tome & Principe 0
Liberia 1 (Sesay 90)

Jun 10 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Salvador 81)
Malawi 0

Group I

Jun 5 – Oujda
Central African Republic 1 (Baboula 29)
Chad 0

Jun 6 – Bamako
Mali 1 (K. Doumbia 45+1)
Ghana 2 (Nuamah 58, J. Ayew 90+4)

Jun 7 – Johannesburg
Madagascar 2 (Raveloson 1, 66)
Comoros 1 (Ben Nabouhane 90+4)

Jun 10 – Kumasi
Ghana 4 (J. Ayew 6 pen, 60, 69, Fatawu 62)
Central African Republic 3 (Mafouta 11, 41, 90)

Jun 11 – Johannesburg
Madagascar 0
Mali 0

Jun 11 – Oujda
Chad 0
Comoros 2 (Maolida 59, Ben Nabouhane 76)

● *Latest group standings on page 91*

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Second Round

Group A

Jun 6 – Holuf
Afghanistan 0
Qatar 0

Jun 6 – Kolkata
India 0
Kuwait 0

Jun 11 – Al Rayyan
Qatar 2 (Ayman 73, Al Rawi 85)
India 1 (Chhangte 37)

Jun 11 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 1 (Al Rashidi 81)
Afghanistan 0

Group B

Jun 6 – Yangon
Myanmar 0
Japan 5 (Nakamura 17, 90+3, Doan 37, Ogawa 75, 83)

Jun 6 – Vientiane
North Korea 1 (Jong Il-gwan 90+2)
Syria 0

Jun 11 – Hiroshima
Japan 5 (Ueda 13, Doan 19, Krouma 21 og, Soma 73 pen, Minamino 85)
Syria 0

Jun 11 – Vientiane
North Korea 4 (Ri Il-song 12, Ri Jo-guk 16, 43, 87 pen)
Myanmar 1 (Wai Lin Aung 57)

Group C

Jun 6 – Singapore
Singapore 0
South Korea 7 (Lee Kang-in 9, 54, Joo Min-kyu 20, Son Heung-min 53, 56, Bae Jun-ho 79, Hwang Hee-chan 81)

Jun 6 – Shenyang
China 1 (Zhang Yuning 79)
Thailand 1 (Supachok 20)

Jun 11 – Seoul
South Korea 1 (Lee Kang-in 61)
China 0

Jun 11 – Bangkok
Thailand 3 (Suphanat 37, Poramet 79, Jaroensak 86)
Singapore 1 (Ik. Fandi 57)

Group D

Jun 6 – Taipei
Chinese Taipei 0
Oman 3 (Al Mushaifri 31, 55, 75)

Jun 6 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Alykulov 24)
Malaysia 1 (Abdurakhmanov 38 og)

Jun 11 – Muscat
Oman 1 (Tokotaev 57 og)
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Zarypbekov 19)

Jun 11 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 3 (Safawi 53, Paulo Josue 69, Adib 90+6)
Chinese Taipei 1 (Yu Yao-hsing 20)

Group E

Jun 6 – Hong Kong
Hong Kong 2 (Ma Hei Wai 14, Pinto 59)
Iran 4 (Taremi 12 pen, 34 pen, 56, Azmoun 65)

Jun 6 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 3 (Aliqulov 17, Urunov 29, Nasrullaev 70)
Turkmenistan 1 (Tirkisow 25)

Jun 11 – Tehran
Iran 0
Uzbekistan 0

Jun 11 – Ashgabat
Turkmenistan 0
Hong Kong 0

Group F

Jun 6 – Jakarta
Indonesia 0
Iraq 2 (Hussein 54 pen, Jasim 88)

Jun 6 – Hanoi
Vietnam 3 (Nguyen Tien Linh 65, 76, Pham Tuan Hai 90+5)
Philippines 2 (Reichelt 62, Ingreso 89)

Jun 11 – Basra
Iraq 3 (H. Ali 12, Jasim 71, Hussein 90+2)
Vietnam 1 (Pham Tuan Hai 84)

Jun 11 – Jakarta
Indonesia 2 (Haye 32, Ridho 56)
Philippines 0

Group G

Jun 6 – Islamabad
Pakistan 0
Saudi Arabia 3 (Al Buraikan 26, 41, Al Juwayr 59)

Jun 6 – Amman
Jordan 3 (Olwan 51, Al Naimat 68, Sadeh 90+4)
Tajikistan 0

Jun 11 – Riyadh
Saudi Arabia 1 (Lajami 16)
Jordan 2 (Olwan 27, Al Rawabdeh 45+2)

Jun 11 – Dushanbe
Tajikistan 3 (Mabatshoev 35, Safarov 65, Hanonov 70)
Pakistan 0

Group H

Jun 6 – Dammam
Nepal 0
United Arab Emirates 4 (Abdalla 12, 14, Saleh 53, Mohammad 75)

Jun 6 – Riffa
Bahrain 0
Yemen 0

Jun 11 – Dubai
United Arab Emirates 1 (Adil 10)
Bahrain 1 (Abduljabbar 4)

Jun 11 – Dammam
Yemen 2 (Al Gahwashi 9 pen, M. Al Dahi 90+1)
Nepal 2 (Bista 22, Karki 66)

Group I

Jun 6 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 0
Australia 2 (Hrustic 29, Yengi 62)

Jun 6 – Doha
Palestine 0
Lebanon 0

Jun 11 – Perth
Australia 5 (Yengi 5 pen, 41, Taggart 26, Boyle 53, Irankunda 87 pen)
Palestine 0

Jun 11 – Al Rayyan
Lebanon 4 (Maatouk 5 pen, 49, 60, Matar 45+2)
Bangladesh 0

● *Final group standings on page 87*

CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)*

Second Round

Group A

Jun 5 – Piggotts
Antigua & Barbuda 1 (Deterville 26)
Bermuda 1 (Ming 90)

Jun 6 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 3 (Lozano 26, Rodriguez 45+2, Castillo 82)
Cuba 1 (Reyes 23)

Jun 8 – George Town
Cayman Islands 1 (Campbell 90+1)
Antigua & Barbuda 0

Jun 9 – Devonshire Parish
Bermuda 1 (Lewis 45+4)
Honduras 6 (Arriaga 15, Ruiz 49, Rodriguez 53, Vega 57, Najar 62, Rochez 90+1)

Group B

Jun 5 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (Telfer 43, Moore 74)
Grenada 2 (Hippolyte 24 pen, 28)

Jun 6 – San Jose
Costa Rica 4 (Galo 40, 50, Alcocer 83, Rojas 84)
St Kitts & Nevis 0

Jun 8 – Basseterre
Bahamas 1 (Julmis 86)
Trinidad & Tobago 7 (Shaw 6, 66, Jones 14 pen, Muckette 43, 45+1, Moore 56, James 84)

Jun 9 – St George's
Grenada 0
Costa Rica 3 (Ugalde 9, Zamora 34, Taylor 70)

Jun 11 – Basseterre
St Kitts & Nevis 1 (Bristow 12)
Bahamas 0

Group C

Jun 5 – Willemstad
Curacao 4 (Janga 25, 62, 86 pen, Kastaneer 90+2)
Barbados 1 (Reid-Stephen 90+2 pen)

Jun 6 – Wildey
Haiti 2 (Duverne 47, Nazon 78)
St Lucia 1 (Elva 18)

Jun 8 – Oranjestad
Aruba 0
Curacao 2 (J. Bacuna 59, Severina 90+6)

Jun 9 – Wildey
Barbados 1 (Reid-Stephen 73)
Haiti 3 (Louicius 12, Lacroix 45+1, Labissiere 84)

Jun 11 – Wildey
St Lucia 2 (Stanislas 45+2, Pearson 66)
Aruba 2 (Bennett 22, Marselia 43)

Group D

Jun 5 – Managua
Nicaragua 4 (Moreno 3, Daniels 23 og, Montes 69, Medina 90+3)
Montserrat 1 (Barzey 9)

Jun 6 – Panama City
Panama 2 (Martinez 62, Rodriguez 65)
Guyana 0

Jun 8 – Belmopan
Belize 0
Nicaragua 4 (Hernandez 40, 65, Barrera 56, Moreno 89)

Jun 9 – Managua
Montserrat 1 (Simon 49)
Panama 3 (Welch 41, Fajardo 62, Rodriguez 71)

Jun 11 – Wildey
Guyana 3 (Moore 66, 72, Gordon 67)
Belize 1 (Bernardez 89)

Group E

Jun 5 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 6 (Galindo 4, 48, Yanes 27, Rubin 58, Martinez 78, Morales 83)
Dominica 0

Jun 6 – Kingston
Jamaica 1 (Nicholson 17)
Dominican Republic 0

Jun 8 – Road Town
British Virgin Islands 0
Guatemala 3 (Castellanos 23, Rubin 45+4, Pinto 47)

Jun 9 – Roseau
Dominica 2 (George 83, Jules 89)
Jamaica 3 (Nicholson 31, 80 pen, Dixon 43)

Jun 11 – San Cristobal
Dominican Republic 4 (Nunez 2, 31, Romero 15 pen, 90+3)
British Virgin Islands 0

Group F

Jun 5 – Paramaribo
Suriname 4 (Becker 39 pen, Hilterman 45+2, Lonwijk 46, Montnor 70)
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Anderson 31)

Jun 6 – San Salvador
El Salvador 0
Puerto Rico 0

Jun 8 – The Valley
Anguilla 0
Suriname 4 (Conraad 10, 75, Pinas 62, Austin 88 og)

Jun 9 – Paramaribo
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Anderson 43)
El Salvador 3 (Henriquez 10, Tejada 60, Bonilla 83)

Jun 11 – Bayamon
Puerto Rico 8 (De Leon 20 pen, 51, Ydrach 31, W. Rivera 48, 65, L. Antonetti 59, Rios 71, Cardona 90+1)
Anguilla 0

● *Latest group standings on page 89*

2024 BALTIC CUP

Semi-Finals

Jun 8 – Liepaja
Latvia 0
Lithuania 2 (Kucys 49, Dolznikov 72)

Jun 8 – Tallinn
Estonia 4 (Tamm 43, Anier 50, Tur 83, Kuraksin 89)
Faroe Islands 1 (Knudsen 24)

Third Place Play-Off

Jun 11 – Liepaja
Latvia 1 (Ciganiks 49)
Faroe Islands 0

Final

Jun 11 – Kaunas
Lithuania 1 (Matulevicius 84)
Estonia 1 (Lepik 82)
Estonia win 4-3 on pens

FRIENDLIES

Jun 1 – Chicago
Mexico 1 (Alvarez 47)
Bolivia 0

Jun 1 – San Jose
Costa Rica 0
Uruguay 0

Jun 2 – Jakarta
Indonesia 0
Tanzania 0

Jun 3 – Algarve
Gibraltar 0
Scotland 2 (Christie 58, Adams 85)

Jun 3 – Rijeka
Croatia 3 (Majer 10, 45, Marco Pasalic 79)
North Macedonia 0

Jun 3 – Newcastle
England 3 (Palmer 60 pen, Alexander-Arnold 85, Kane 89)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 0

Jun 3 – Szombathely
Albania 3 (Broja 31, Asani 47, Muci 67)
Liechtenstein 0

Jun 3 – Nuremberg
Germany 0
Ukraine 0

Jun 4 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Mlakar 11, Ilicic 63)
Armenia 1 (Haroyan 56)

Jun 4 – Luzern
Switzerland 4 (Zuber 20, Amdouni 47, Elvedi 63, Shaqiri 70 pen)
Estonia 0

Jun 4 – Bucharest
Romania 0
Bulgaria 0

Jun 4 – Lisbon
Portugal 4 (Dias 17, Jota 45+4 pen, Fernandes 55, 84)
Finland 2 (Pukki 72, 77)

Jun 4 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Idah 36, Parrott 90+2)
Hungary 1 (Lang 40)

Jun 4 – Vienna
Austria 2 (Wimmer 10, Baumgartner 13)
Serbia 1 (Pavlovic 35)

Jun 4 – Bologna
Italy 0
Turkey 0

Jun 5 – Wiener Neustadt
Slovakia 4 (Rigo 8, Suslov 10, Haraslin 36, Strelec 58)
San Marino 0

Jun 5 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Hojbjerg 2, Eriksen 86)
Sweden 1 (Isak 9)

Jun 5 – Oslo
Norway 3 (Haaland 15, 70, 75)
Kosovo 0

Jun 5 – Brussels
Belgium 2 (De Bruyne 44, Trossard 90+3 pen)
Montenegro 0

Jun 5 – Metz
France 3 (Kolo Muani 43, Clauss 70, Mbappe 85)
Luxembourg 0

Jun 5 – Badajoz
Spain 5 (Ayoze 24, Oyarzabal 53, 66, 73, Torres 81)
Andorra 0

Jun 5 – Denver
Mexico 0
Uruguay 4 (Nunez 7, 44, 49, Pellistri 26)

Jun 6 – Algarve
Gibraltar 0
Wales 0

Jun 6 – Rotterdam
Netherlands 4 (Depay 50, Frimpong 57, Weghorst 63, Van Dijk 83)
Canada 0

Jun 7 – Grodig
Czech Republic 7 (Barak 6 pen, Chytil 44, 57, D. Jurasek 47, Lingr 71, M. Jurasek 85, Cerny 89)
Malta 1 (Mbong 59)

Jun 7 – Minsk
Belarus 0
Russia 4 (Oblyakov 8, Tyukavin 20, Chalov 63, 69)

Jun 7 – Yerevan
Armenia 2 (Marochkin 4 og, Bichakhchyan 58)
Kazakhstan 1 (Islamkhan 90+6 pen)

Jun 7 – Bucharest
Romania 0
Liechtenstein 0

Jun 7 – Glasgow
Scotland 2 (Hoskonen 50 og, Shankland 58)
Finland 2 (Kallman 72, Antman 85 pen)

Jun 7 – Wembley
England 0
Iceland 1 (Thorsteinsson 12)

Jun 7 – Warsaw
Poland 3 (Walukiewicz 11, Zielinski 16, Romanczuk 30)
Ukraine 1 (Dovbyk 41)

Jun 7 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 2 (Ogawa 22, Ty 30)
Mongolia 0

Jun 7 – Monchengladbach
Germany 2 (Havertz 59, Gross 89)
Greece 1 (Masouras 33)

Jun 7 – Szombathely
Albania 3 (Bajrami 12, Manaj 81, Laci 88)
Azerbaijan 1 (Gurbanli 90)

Jun 7 – Lima
Peru 0
Paraguay 0

Jun 8 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Sporar 14)
Bulgaria 1 (Despodov 4 pen)

Jun 8 – Chisinau
Moldova 3 (Motpan 43, Stina 71, Bogaciuc 78)
Cyprus 2 (Spoljaric 51, Pittas 53)

Jun 8 – St Gallen
Switzerland 1 (Widmer 26)
Austria 1 (Baumgartner 5)

Jun 8 – Brunei
Brunei 1 (Azwan 61)
Sri Lanka 0

Jun 8 – Stockholm
Sweden 0
Serbia 3 (S. Milinkovic-Savic 18, Mitrovic 60, Tadic 70)

Jun 8 – Debrecen
Hungary 3 (Sallai 11, Varga 19, 22)
Israel 0

Jun 8 – Lisbon
Portugal 1 (Jota 48)
Croatia 2 (Modric 8 pen, Budimir 56)

Jun 8 – Brondby
Denmark 3 (Hojbjerg 12, Vestergaard 21, Poulson 90)
Norway 1 (Haaland 72)

Jun 8 – Brussels
Belgium 3 (Lukaku 42 pen, 57, Trossard 81)
Luxembourg 0

Jun 8 – Mallorca
Spain 5 (Pedri 12, 29, Morata 18, Fabian 35, Oyarzabal 60)
Northern Ireland 1 (Ballard 2)

Jun 8 – Maryland
United States 1 (Weah 58)
Colombia 5 (Arias 6, Borre 19, Rios 77, Carrascal 85, Sinisterra 88)

Jun 8 – Texas
Mexico 2 (Couto 73 og, Martinez 90+2)
Brazil 3 (Pereira 5, Martinelli 54, Endrick 90+6)

Jun 9 – Empoli
Italy 1 (Frattesi 38)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 0

Jun 9 – Trnava
Slovakia 4 (Kucka 45, Bozenik 56, Ampadu 60 og, Benes 90)
Wales 0

Jun 9 – Bordeaux
France 0
Canada 0

Jun 9 – Podgorica
Montenegro 1 (Jovetic 66)
Georgia 3 (Kiteishvili 10, Mikautadze 33, Zivzivadze 83)

Jun 9 – Chicago
Argentina 1 (Di Maria 40)
Ecuador 0

Jun 10 – Hradec Kralove
Czech Republic 2 (Schick 60 pen, Barak 90+8 pen)
North Macedonia 1 (Alimi 65)

Jun 10 – Rotterdam
Netherlands 4 (Simons 23, Van Dijk 49, Malen 79, Weghorst 90+3)
Iceland 0

Jun 10 – Warsaw
Poland 2 (Swiderski 12, Zalewski 90)
Turkey 1 (Alper Yilmaz 77)

Jun 11 – Brunei
Brunei 1 (Azwan 37)
Sri Lanka 0

Jun 11 – Budapest
Belarus 0
Israel 4 (Melamed 7, Safari 18, Shlomo 36, Kna'an 82)

Jun 11 – Chisinau
Moldova 0
Ukraine 4 (Yaremchuk 2, Tsyhankov 43, Dovbyk 49, Sudakov 54)

Jun 11 – Ulaanbaatar
Mongolia 2 (Naranbold 53, Gantogtokh Gantuya 61)
Cambodia 1 (Ty 17)

Jun 11 – Grodig
Malta 0
Greece 2 (Bakasetas 7 pen, Tzolis 15)

Jun 11 – Serravalle
San Marino 1 (Giocondi 81)
Cyprus 4 (Satsias 45+2, Kastanos 53, 55, Kakoullis 83)

Jun 11 – Aveiro
Portugal 3 (Felix 18, Ronaldo 50, 60)
Republic of Ireland 0

Jun 11 – Murcia
Northern Ireland 2 (Bradley 16, 22)
Andorra 0

Jun 11 – Szombathely
Azerbaijan 3 (Emreli 42, Mahmudov 51 pen, Bayramov 73)
Kazakhstan 2 (Vorogovskiy 2, Samorodov 28)

Jun 11 – Santiago
Chile 3 (Davila 17, 37, Vargas 53)
Paraguay 0

Jun 13 – Orlando
United States 1 (Pulisic 26)
Brazil 1 (Rodrygo 17)

Jun 13 – Chester
Ecuador 3 (Valencia 18, Yeboah 25, J. Caicedo 70 pen)
Bolivia 1 (Terceros 88)

Jun 14 – Maryland
Argentina 4 (Messi 12, 77, La. Martinez 39 pen, 66)
Guatemala 1 (Li. Martinez 4 og)

Jun 14 – Chester
El Salvador 0
Peru 1 (Flores 17)

Jun 15 – East Hartford
Colombia 3 (Arias 5, Cordoba 25, Diaz 41)
Bolivia 0

Jun 16 – East Hartford
Ecuador 2 (Sarmiento 8, Hincapie 89)
Honduras 1 (Rochez 29 pen)

Jun 16 – Panama City
Panama 0
Paraguay 1 (Velazquez 25)

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Dejan Savicevic

Milan 4 Barcelona 0

1994 Champions League final, Athens

The Montenegrin player lived up to his nickname of "The Genius" when it mattered most...

"Although 30 years have passed by, I remember everything about that game – maybe also because of the many interviews I have given about it over the years!

Everybody considered Barcelona clear favourites. Of course, we were not so happy about that, but I guess it motivated us even more – especially after Barcelona manager Johan Cruyff said that his team was more complete and more competitive, that our game was based on defending while they always attack. He also said: "Just look at Romario – he's scored more goals than the whole Milan team."

One of the main reasons Barcelona were favourites was because we were missing two important players: Franco Baresi and Alessandro Costacurta were suspended. I have to admit, we were concerned, because they were the backbone of our defence. There was a bit of fear, mostly because of Romario. He was unpredictable, he scored goals with ease and he was also strong on the ball.

Our manager Fabio Capello had to tinker to reshuffle the defence; Baresi was not only the best defender of Milan, but one of the best defenders in football history. Eventually Capello decided that Tassotti would play right-back. He was an experienced player, 34 years old. Panucci was moved from right-back to left-back, while Maldini was moved from left-back to centre-back next to Filippo Galli.

On the day of the departure to Athens, after a training session, club president Silvio Berlusconi visited us in Milanello. After he finished his speech, he turned to me and said: "If you really are a genius, show it tomorrow at the game."

We started the game well. Albertini neutralised Guardiola, who was vital for their ball distribution, and Barcelona's attacking play never really functioned in that fluent and dangerous way it usually did. They did have possession, but it was all under control. Our defence was solid, Donadoni had a great night, I had an excellent night, Boban and Desailly as well, also Massaro – we played our best game of that whole season.

Champions League winner...Dejan Savicevic lifts the trophy

I set up the first goal for Massaro and he also scored the second goal after a great assist by Donadoni, so at half-time we were 2-0 up. Early in the second half, I scored our third goal. I was wide on the right flank, Albertini played a long pass to me, but the ball bounced up high and it looked as if Nadal would either control the ball or kick it away. But I managed to get to the ball before him and I saw that the goalkeeper was about to come out from his goal. When I got to the edge of the box, on the right-hand side, I tried to lob him and I succeeded. Of course, there was also a bit of luck, but I placed that ball exactly where I wanted to.

It was an incredible feeling to score such a beautiful goal in a Champions League final, a goal that practically secured us the victory. Afterwards I also hit the post and later Desailly scored our fourth goal for the final scoreline.

> "It was an incredible feeling to score such a beautiful goal in a Champions League final"

Throughout my career, I played many big games for Red Star Belgrade, Milan and the Yugoslavia national team. But that night in Athens, no doubt, will always have a special place in my memory."

Interview by Vladimir Novak

At the double... Savicevic's strike partner Daniele Massaro hit a brace

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